





SHIFTING SANDS

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BY

MRS. ROMILLY FEDDEN

(KATHARINE WALDO DOUGLAS)

Fedden, Mrs. Katharine Waldo Douglas



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No 1.

To A. D.

My brother — does the sun still shine in Tacitus,
And the ash tree wave as proudly upon Mount Eliza,
And the creek lead little feet through the enchanted
meadows, while the fog clouds London town?

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PROLOGUE

TWO HUNDRED miles from any sea — yet the sea-sand drifts and shifts as silently and ceaselessly here to-day as it has drifted and shifted through all the millions of years since the last great upheaval of this atom of a world prisoned the trilobites in the out-cropping limestone of the neighbouring pasture, and, rolling back great waters, stranded this inland sand-dune.

Sand, sand, sand, white, fine, shifting sea-sand looking from far like a livid welt in the rock-broken face of the hills; sand that blowing sifts with a disturbing, mysterious whisper not to be heard by dulled ears; sand that will not be held by any boundaries, but softly creeps through, mounts over every man-set barrier, — sea-sand shifting and drifting two hundred miles from any sea.

The sun of April had just set — that sun which at noontide hints of summer nearing, yet, as day wanes, remembers still the winter past. The sky above the horizon shone palely yellow, coldly primrose, shading up through faint clear green to tender grey. The country that lay below this quiet arch was a farming

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land, hardly redeemed from forest half a century ago, a land of wide sweeps, of windy, rounded hills and open valleys, dotted with white farmhouses and red barns; a land whose boast and beauty were its single stately, symmetrical elms and its wide flowing "creek" that, rising thirty miles distant in the North woods, rolled on to join the Mohawk River. An Indian land this had been, and the county now bore an Indian name.

"What," thought Robert Dimmock, as he crossed the sand, his back to the widespread country and the evening sky, "had those early red men thought of this inland dune? How had they explained it?"

He stopped and turned back to say the words to Mary, his wife.

She was standing looking out across the farmland to the sunset. Something in her attitude stopped the commonplace before it reached his lips. Something about the stillness of her slender figure, there in the twilight facing the west, stirred him deeply to sadness.

It was a feeling without any apparent logical cause, yet it laid a hand on his heartstrings and lent a sharp note of anxiety to his voice.

"Mary!"

"Yes," she turned slowly, looking at him from where she stood, a pace of sand between them.

He searched her face avidly for reassurance against the moment's intolerable pain. Were there shadows beneath her eyes? Was she paler than she

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should be? Had her cheek lost its delicate curve — or was it all some trick of the evening light?

Startled, their eyes questioned each other.

“What is it?” The question leaped from both. But she answered it, taking a step to him.

“It’s this place, I think. It always — troubles me.”

“I know,” he said.

They walked on together, the sand-dune rising in billows to their right, falling away gradually to their left. Their feet sank deep at every step.

“It frightens me,” Mary declared. “I feel just as I used to when I was a child in the dark in a strange room at night. I want to shut my eyes and run. Is n’t it silly, Robert?”

He felt for her hand and covered it with his own. “You are catching my moods,” he said. They walked on in silence, hand in hand; then he spoke again. “It drifts. See? Up there it has smothered a tree, there it has lost a boundary — the fence is buried. Here we follow a track — it was a road a year ago.”

“You mean that it is resistless, that’s why I’m afraid?”

“As resistless as the law of change. All shifts — all changes — law, custom, convention — nothing is stable under the sun.” His voice was cold and even.

“You, a clergyman, Robert, say this?” Her answering tone was warm with challenge.

“Yes, when I am honest with myself. But why

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fear change? Change is not chance. There's a pattern traced by the wind on the shifting sand."

She shivered. "I want my pattern in stone! This is sinister. It will be sifting noiselessly over another road made vainly by some other man when we and our child — our Jean — yes, and her children and theirs — are dead and gone."

"Poor Mary!"

"Not poor, as long as you understand. There can be no fear really as long as I have you. But to be alone — how could one bear it? You know what I mean. All the outside pressing in and terror just waiting to swoop down and clutch, the terror of all that we accept as commonplace — day, night, sky, earth, ourselves — life — death. Just the glimpse I seem to get at moments terrifies me. Then I cling to you with my soul. In all the shifting there is love —"

"And God."

"The same — and, clinging, I am safe. Love brings a terror, an awareness, but the power to cast it out. See! The sand has drifted here since we crossed it two hours ago!"

"The wind has risen."

"The wind, which is God. So God makes change and saves from change, Robert. Stop a minute. I am out of breath."

The two stood close together, Mary's slight form pressed against her husband's tall, spare figure, his arm about her.

"Sand left by an ocean rolled back æons ago."

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How it must have roared, Mary, sucked away suddenly."

She nodded. "What did you read to me the other night? That our nineteen hundred years is as two seconds' span in the twenty-four-hour day since creation? And this sand has been shifting and drifting ever since."

"You are shivering. It's the wind. You are cold. Beena will be anxious if I keep you out too late. We're a long way from home. Come."

"I know, but —" she lingered. "Oh, hold me close for a moment. No, I'm not crying. There!" She pushed him away, with a laughing break in her gentle voice. "I am good for the rest of the way. Here's the birch wood at last. And the moon, Robert! See it through the trees!"

Side by side Robert Dimmock and Mary his wife followed the track in the moonlight, through the white birches, over the hill and out of sight.

Yet behind them the sea-sand, lifted by the rising wind, still drifted and shifted silently and ceaselessly over the sand-dunes.

CHAPTER I

THE table at the Unitarian parsonage was laid for breakfast. Two places to-day, where there had been three. Otherwise all was unchanged.

The sun, through the high, many-paned windows, slanted, as usual, upon the white linen, upon the "acorn" silver tea-set, upon the thin old silver spoons, upon the clear blue and white of Canton china, which together represented no modern attempt at æsthetic effect, but a dead woman's unconscious love of the gracious things in life.

For she who had treasured these things, to the wonder of her neighbours in this village of Tacitus, in northern New York, had left them all. Mary Dimmock, the minister's wife, was dead and buried, the funeral but yesterday. Yet the house, under the capable management of the one old servant Beena, had already reassumed its outward peace after the crowded, hushed excitement of the past four days.

Beena had been up since dawn. She came in now from the kitchen, a tall, gaunt, grizzle-haired Scotch-woman, gravely stepping. She looked at the tall clock, ticking portentously, whose hands pointed to nine; flicked a speck of dust from its tall mahogany case, glanced with a stiff face at the table laid for two; then with hands tightly folded under her black apron returned to her waiting in the kitchen. Poor

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man — let him sleep the heavy sleep of sorrow and exhaustion — and the child too.

But the child was not sleeping; wrapped in the folds of the dining-room curtain she had heard Beena come and go. She had slipped down some time before. She had stood for long moments in the hall, with her hand on the knob of the dining-room door, her small face set, before she had entered bravely. Then the commonplace detail of the table had struck sharply upon her consciousness. Her mother? There was no place for her. She was gone — gone. A swelling wave of grief had rushed over the child. She had stood still, bracing herself to meet it, until she heard Beena's step approaching. Then, without reasoning, she had blindly sought to hide herself.

Now that Beena had gone, she still stood shivering, her thin little body crisped with dread of all that the table meant to her. For endless weeks — all dreary spaces of time — she must sit there alone, facing her father. Her imagination magnified the ordeal of every day, of every meal. A sob shook her. *What* could she say to him? Would he try to talk to her, or would he bring a book and read, as he had on the rare occasions of her mother's absence? That would be better if he brought a book. The hope calmed her.

She pulled aside the curtain and looked out. But at the glimpse of the room, her trouble returned. She would have to talk. Her mother always did and

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he liked it. What should she say? She strained her ears for his step, searching for her words. At any moment he might come. He might now be on the stair — and she would say —

“You’re down, child,” Beena said, poking her head in from the kitchen again and seeing her. “What are you doing there? Have you heard the minister movin’? I knocked twice, but he gave me no answer, so I let him sleep.”

“No, I have not heard my father.” The child answered precisely, stepping out from the curtain folds. “Shall I go up and call him?”

Beena glanced again at the clock, and Jean’s eyes followed hers. “We’ll give him five minutes more,” the woman said, and withdrew.

The child remained at the window, her hands twisting together, her eyes still on the clock. “Beena shan’t see me cry,” she whispered fiercely. “No one shall see me cry.” She paused, her hands still. “You hear, No one!” She flung the assurance around the room, from the clock to the silver candlesticks on the high white mantel-shelf, to the tiny figures that posed upon the blue jar, full of paper spills, to the familiar shapes of cherished porcelain in the diamond-paned corner cupboard, to the old prints in their worn gilt frames upon the wall.

All these things had, like her, known her mother’s gentle touch; must miss her. She had hidden from Beena, but here were things that understood. She advanced into the room. “You all understand,” she

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said breathlessly. "And you know that I know that you do. Things understand more than people lots of times. People are more wooden than things lots of times. Gardens understand and trees — and I am going out now."

Her voice was brave. She opened the door into the broad hall which ran through the house from front to back. Here, too, sympathy seemed to her to vibrate in the air. "The whole house knows and is sorry," she thought.

As she quickly opened the back door and stepped into the pale April sunshine, her mind was busy with this idea, twisting it and turning it and wringing consolation from it. "Everything knows," she decided, "and oh, they'll be sorry when she does n't come again. They'll wonder, maybe, why she does n't come. But the big trees will whisper and the little trees will hear and tell the grass and the flowers till every littlest thing will know. At least, they do know now and they're sorry, and they say if I'll come out to them, she'll be here to help."

She went down the path, talking in a monotonous undertone at random, soothing herself with her imaginings. In the borders green shoots were piercing the mould. She saw them and stopped. She crouched on her heels and touched them softly. Brave little things from the long winter dark underground — the dark underground — she rested for an instant motionless, gazing at them, then with a shudder drew away and rose.

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"Jean!" Beena's voice rang sharply. "Jeanie!" Jean turned. Beena was coming ponderously toward her.

"Your father's not in his room, nor anywhere in the house. Have you seen him?"

The child's eyes caught the woman's look of apprehension. For a moment they returned each other's gaze. The child was the first to speak.

"I have n't seen him."

Beena paused. "Well," she said. "Never mind. Come to breakfast. Perhaps he's already back."

Jean followed, without comment, to the house. She knew that he was not back and that Beena did not believe that he was. As they reached the door she paused with a certain dignity. "Beena," she said firmly, "we must not say anything to anybody even if we are frightened — yet. Papa would not like it. If he does n't come, we will go and tell Dr. Erskine. He is papa's friend."

Before Beena could answer, the sound of the knocker, hesitatingly lifted, sounded at the other end of the hall.

With foreboding Beena pushed Jean into the dining-room. "Stay there," she said.

The knocking was repeated, more boldly now. She walked to the front door, wiped her hands nervously on her black apron, and turned the brass knob.

In the porch stood two men. Apology strove with alarm in their faces. Beena bent a stern gaze upon them. It must, indeed, be something of impor-

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tance which should bring this oddly consorted pair to the door of the Unitarian parsonage.

"Well?" Beena's voice was harshly imperative.

Mr. Donner, who was a farmer, and the taller of the two men, fell back a step, as if in deference to his companion's rusty black coat and wide-brimmed black hat.

The Welsh preacher, Owen Owens by name, braced his thin figure, and gravely removed the hat from his large head. His face had the look of stale cream cheese, his hair was lank and black, but his thin-lipped mouth was clever and his bulging brow gave evidence of thought. He swallowed hard, then cleared his throat.

"Woman," he said solemnly, speaking in a throaty Welsh accent, "the hand of God has fallen. The meenister is dead. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Dead!" Beena repeated the words mechanically. Her hands fell heavily at her sides, yet in her strong face there was no surprise. She had felt the approach of calamity. "Dead!" She closed the door carefully behind her and stepped out to them. "Dead!" she said a third time.

"Murdered, ma'am." The farmer spoke. "Struck on the head with a spade or some such thing out to the graveyard."

"By the side of her gr-r-ave." The preacher's throaty roll gave to the word a deep significance. "By the side of her grave."

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Beena withdrew herself. She could bear no familiarity of sympathy.

"Murdered?" she repeated, addressing the farmer, "out at the graveyard?" Her tone demanded explanation.

With a glance at the preacher the farmer stepped awkwardly nearer, and yet, with deference, spoke behind his raised hand.

At his whispered words the woman recoiled.

"I've allus said the graveyard's too far from the village," the farmer declared aloud. "He went out to visit her grave, finds 'em there or they come and findin' him there's a struggle and they make an end of him. Plain as day. As I was comin' by into town an hour ago, I see the cemetery gate open. I got down to shut it an' glanced in and see'd somethin' dark lyin' there. It was him. I've allus said the graveyard's a lonesome place."

Horror held Beena's slow mind. She felt for the doorknob uncertainly.

The preacher motioned the farmer to silence, and himself continued gently. "Brother Donner met me just as he got to your door. We went first across the road." He motioned with his head to the big square stone house which stood opposite retired in its grove of elms. "To Dr. Erskine's. As he is a prominent member of the congregation and a friend of the deceased, it seemed more fitting that he should break the news. But Miss Roxina said she could not see her way to wake him. He had been up all night

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with a case and is worn out. She said she'd tell him as soon as he was up and he'd come across — Now, if there is anything more we can do for you — any one else —”

Beena shook her head. “I must go in,” she said dully. “They'll be bringin' him and there's the child.”

The farmer hitched himself up in his boots. “There ain't no hurry,” he said kindly. “Coroner's gone fishin' up the creek. It'll be an hour or two 'fore we can get an inquest. Good-day, ma'am. Sorry to bring bad news. As we was a-sayin', it's rough on the kid.”

He turned away. The preacher hesitated. “I am sorry he's gone,” he said in a deep voice. “Though the Lord's will be done. We never had much to say to one another, but Brother Dimmock was a fair man.” He turned and followed the farmer down the steps of the porch, down the short strip of beaten graveled path, and down the stone steps that led to the broad, grass-bound village street.

Motionless, Beena watched them go. With an effort she pulled herself round, opened the house door and stood on the threshold surveying the hall. The faded, large-patterned scarlet-and-green Brussels carpet was speckless. Against the left wall, between the doors to the sitting-room and dining-room, a huge black horsehair sofa stood stiffly, while against the right wall, between the two doors that led to the narrow staircase and to the parlour, stood a slender-legged mahogany table.

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With rigid face Beena took careful note of all, then laid her hand on the door of the seldom-used "best room" and looked in. It, too, was in perfect order, but the blinds must again be opened, the furniture pushed aside, all Mary Dimmock's treasured possessions disclosed to the curious eyes of the village. She closed the door sharply. Yes — again the hall would be muddled by many feet, the table would hold a motley array of hats, and people would stare.

She had forgotten the child in her unreasoning bitterness against the people of Tacitus, against the men who had come, against the man who was dead. Now the thought of the ordeal before her drew tight lines of pain about her mouth. She walked rigidly to the dining-room door, and even as Jean had waited, not daring to enter, so Beena waited now. But it had to be done. She slowly opened the door. Jean stood just within. She looked up.

"You need n't tell me," she said blankly. "I know. Papa is dead."

Fighting the strong reticence of years, Beena put out her hand to the child, but with a wild sob Jean dashed by her out of the room and out of the house. She rushed through the garden, across the rough lawn to a group of tall hemlock trees. There, parting the low, sweeping branches, she pushed through and threw herself face downward on the shiny carpet within.

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“Help me, help me, help me,” she sobbed. “I did n’t want to see him, and now he’ll never come back; oh, father, I did love you. I did love you. Oh, mother, tell him that I loved him — oh, mother — mother — mother —”

CHAPTER II

"S'POSE we had better go and tell the news at the store," Mr. Donner said, as he and the preacher turned along the quiet village street towards the one centre of life, the square. He spoke in a hushed voice, conscious that he was the bearer of tidings to shock and startle the little community.

The preacher, holding his hat in one hand, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You don't need me for that, Brother Donner," he said in his thick voice. "You can get on now, and there's a bit o' delicate work waiting in my shop this meenit — a fine timepiece it is, waitin' to be returned to the judge's wife in Attica." He spoke the names quite simply. Every one knew that Owen Owens's skill was even more widely known than in that neighbouring city, and that strange and beautiful things found their way to his hands for restoration and repair. "I've dawdled long enough thro' respect to the meenister," he went on soberly, "so I'll just be goin' on. But I'm thinking what will the doctor say?"

"You know your own business," Mr. Donner agreed. "And we can't do much without the doctor, that's a fact."

The two men nodded and the preacher walked on across the square, past the big green watering-

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trough and down by the post-office, while the farmer stood still, arrested by a woman's voice which spoke over the fence at his side.

"What's that I heard? What about the minister? What's the matter? You do look solemn."

As she spoke, Mrs. Beebe opened her gate and appeared, broom in hand. "What is it?" she asked crisply.

The farmer nodded awkwardly, then through fear of the little woman's compelling gaze blurted out the truth.

No horror could daunt Maria Beebe.

"Doctor know?" she snapped. "No?" She turned decisively, whisking off her apron as she ran up the path. "I am going straight to the parsonage," she called back.

"Trust you for getting in yer sharp nose where 't is n't wanted," the farmer grumbled. "Wish I had n't told her," he thought. "Still, she'd 'a' known in a minute. Sam would run acrost with the news. Every bit o' news Sam gits to the store is grist fer her mill. There he is now."

The farmer crossed the road and stolidly ascended the unpainted wooden steps which led up to the door of the general store. Sam Beebe stood on the threshold, chewing a toothpick, his hands in his pockets and his slouching figure framed between the heterogeneous collection of objects exposed in the two shop windows. Even his laziness was galvanised into energy by the news.

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"What's the doctor say?" he demanded. "What had we better do? Do you hear this?" He turned into the store and reported the news to two or three men within. And at once, and wherever it was received in Tacitus that day, the first question that inevitably came was "What does the doctor say? Does the doctor know? What does the doctor think?" For in Tacitus, John Erskine, the doctor, was the head of the community. He held the place not so much by virtue of inheritance as by personal force. It no longer suffices in these quiet villages for a man to be doctor, minister, or lawyer in order to command respect. He must have more than the professional tag to which alone fifty years ago his fellow citizens gladly raised the hat.

It was not because John Erskine lived in the old house of his fathers, not because he had an education, that Tacitus turned to him. It was that, born among them, understanding them, he unconsciously embodied to them an ideal of manliness which they admired and understood.

Their fathers had known his fathers; yet when he had returned from abroad at his father's death, after an absence of ten years in school, college, and post-graduate study, to take the old doctor's practice, they had held their sympathy in abeyance until he had won their confidence. He himself, fresh from a professional triumph in Paris, had acknowledged to himself that Tacitus would not take him on faith, and respecting them for it, he had set himself to the

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task of winning them — of proving that he was a worthy successor to those of his name who had preceded him.

In 1780 the first Erskine had journeyed on horseback from his home in Massachusetts, lured by the word "unknown" scrawled on the map over the country to the west of Albany; and having passed the last block-house fort at a fording of the West Canada Creek, had come through rock-seamed hills into a lovely, fertile valley. There he had camped and shortly made claim to the Government for a grant of land. There he had built his house, such an one as had never yet been raised west of Albany. It took a year to build. The beams were of oak, hand-hewn from the forest; the walls of stone quarried in the hillside; and all the fittings of the interior came the long road from Albany. All the fine, hand-wrought wooden moulding, every single "egg and dart," every palmette in wainscot, door, or over-mantel, — all was carved in Albany for its place in that house which old General Erskine built in the wilderness.

Before the house was finished, its owner was followed by his friend Peter Vanderveld, a Dutch refugee of some consequence, who, asking only for liberty of thought and conscience, built himself a more modest habitation, and these two families so founded that village which, in their common love of the classics, they called Tacitus.

Generations had come and gone since that day,

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the old Dutch stock had long since died out, but the more sturdy Erskine stock had taken root and flourished.

It was down the delicately bannistered, wide staircase of the old house that John Erskine came to-day, to be met by old Martha with the grim news poured forth in horrified volubility.

"Good God, woman! And you never called me!" His face was stern, his voice indignant.

"What's the use o' callin' ye for a corpse?" the old woman grumbled as she followed him into the dining-room. "Naught can happen in this place but they won't have ye in it."

"In it?" John Erskine wheeled to face her.

The old woman sniffed scornfully, her small eyes bright. "Inter everything," she declared. "It's you they want and you they've got to have."

"The coffee," he interrupted, turning away. "Nothing else. I must go at once."

"There's no pleasin' men," Martha declared audibly. "Called me 'woman,'" she sniffed, as she hurried to the kitchen. "Never did I see Mr. John in such a way." She had served in the house since he was a baby.

Alone for a moment, John Erskine stood at the mantelpiece, his head upon his crossed arms. The only man whom he called his friend in the sense of equal, in Tacitus, was dead. Robert Dimmock was dead. He raised his head, turned to the whiskey decanter on the sideboard, checked himself, then

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stepped to the table and poured himself a glass of water which he drank, as Martha entered with the tray. She was followed by John Erskine's housekeeper, Miss Roxina Adams, a distant relation called "cousin" by courtesy, whose anxious features were mottled with emotion.

"Oh, Cousin John — you've heard. What shall we do? That poor child. What shall we do?"

Before she had ended her questions she wished she had held her peace, for John Erskine turned a face of still exasperation on her. It frightened her into further futile speech, which was checked by a sudden outburst from him. His blue eyes were steely.

"It seems a pity to cultivate emotion at the expense of intelligence. If either you or Martha had the brains of a polypus you would have called me when those men came. Certainly a physician, more than any one else, needs some one in his house who has judgement enough to interpret his orders."

"But you said —"

"Of course I said," he repeated as he rose from the table and left the room.

"If the minister was his friend, he need not be takin' the murder out on us," Martha grumbled as the door closed. "It were none of our doin's."

"I know Cousin John does not mean to be unkind," Miss Adams whimpered through her handkerchief.

"I am sure that he does when he's like that," Martha answered shortly.

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Dr. Erskine passed into the hall, picked up his hat and gloves and, straightening his shoulders, faced towards the parsonage. As he walked down the straight drive between the elm trees from the house to the stone gateposts he saw a buggy holding three men dash by on the road. The mood of acute exasperation held him. He cursed under his breath the rural appetite for horrors. Half the village would be on the way — while he must go to the child. Half the village — all the men and the older boys freed from the small stone schoolhouse would be running, gabbling, hurrying out to see. He cursed them again as he crossed the road.

How many times since his return had he come this way to spend an hour with Robert and Mary Dimmock. So short a time ago and they both awaited him here — Robert his friend and Mary with the deep and shadowed beauty. Ah, he had fought for her life. He had fought! He had brought all his skill, all the skill of Europe to bear on her case. Yet it had baffled him, as it had baffled his masters in Paris. He had not saved her. With her husband he had seen her die — still young, in all her faded, touching loveliness. He straightened himself to endure the memory. How she had dreaded leaving the child! How the child was doubly bereft. He hastened. For her sake, he was hurrying to the child, though other work awaited him. For his friend, Robert Dimmock, lay dead — murdered. He clenched his hands in the pockets of his

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greatcoat. Why had he left the man alone the past night! why had he left him! The thought was torture. His head bent, he steadily mounted the stone steps to the parsonage.

“Dr. Erskine — oh — Dr. Erskine” — came in a low cry. “It’s Jean — here — here — the old arbour.”

He stopped on the gravelled path, raised a hand to show that he had heard, and struck across the grass to the trees. There, stooping, he pushed his way through the branches into the small interior space and straightened himself to his full height.

Jean stood before him, a small, quiet, tense figure in a straight black dress, made by the village dressmaker for her mother’s funeral. Too narrow across the chest, and too scant in the skirt, the garment made her look younger than her twelve years. She did not seem to have been crying, but gazed straight at him out of her black-lashed clear grey eyes. Her hair fell in a black disorder about her small white face. She had been just a child to him before, just the child of her father and mother, with none of the little flattering ways which invite attention, none of the beauty which attracts caresses and admiration. Suddenly as his eyes met that wide, intense gaze, she took on individuality, became a personality to him.

“Jean” — John Erskine’s voice was shaken — “what are you doing here?”

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She did not answer, but the blank desolation in her face seemed to deepen.

"Jeanie," he repeated, holding out his hands. He was stirred to the depths by the desolate stillness of her face.

She came forward obediently, an excited light growing in her eyes.

"Don't make me go to the house," she begged. "I can't. Indeed, I can't." A sob rose in her throat and choked her.

"Of course not," he answered firmly. "Just be quiet and tell me the trouble. You can."

"I know," she repeated with a lesser sob. "I don't mind Beena — much. But Mrs. Beebe has come, and now other people have come, and I — can't bear — it. I ran away. I came out here and hid at once, and lots have gone in since. I have seen them — all whispering together — and talking. Oh, they have no right — they have no right. They are not mamma's friends — nor papa's friends."

She was shivering from head to foot with excitement. "I am afraid," she rushed on, "that they will tell me things. I don't want to hear things — don't let them tell me things. I don't want to know, if it's awful."

The doctor turned abruptly away. For a moment he stood rigid, his eyes on the ground, then he turned back, his face white and drawn.

"My poor child," he said. He took her hands, looking down at her. "I know what you mean —

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I understand your feelings. But all these people who are going to the house mean to be very kind. They respected and loved your father and mother and they are very fond of you, and they want to show it."

"I can't go in; I can't," she began again, pushing him away.

"No," he said; "I do not wish you to. I would not allow you to. But you shall come with me, over to my study, and there you shall be safe for the rest of the day. You shall see no one if you do not like."

"Jean — Jean — Jeanie!"

The cry was repeated in several tones, meant to be reassuring and coaxing.

The child clung to the doctor's arm.

"You see! They are coming — it's Mrs. Beebe. What shall I do?"

The doctor peered through the branches.

"It's all right," he said. "They are going the other way. Come — we have time to escape! Give me your hand."

He parted the branches and led her out, talking to her quietly, and so bore her safely in the shadow of the hemlock trees, down the steps and across the road. Jean hardly knew what had happened before she found herself inside the stone gateposts, walking down the avenue at John Erskine's side. And in spite of the lethargy of sorrow upon her, it was almost with awe that she approached the house. It had been the wonder house of many childish dreams.

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Its pillared front had risen mysterious through the trees. What though the wide stone steps were cracked and lichened, and the white paint had scaled in places from the lofty Doric columns — something told her that it was beautiful.

John Erskine led her up those steps between the pillars, opened the great front door and led her into the wide hall papered, above the white wainscot, with an Arcadian landscape in faded greens. The floor was covered with white China matting, and against one wall stood a narrow, crystal-knobbed mahogany table bearing a red-and-blue bowl, dragon-wreathed, of old Bristol ware. Opposite the front door a window on the low landing of the wide staircase looked out on budding trees.

The picture struck so vividly upon the child's subconscious mind that, though hardly seeing it at the time, she remembered it all her life, even to the bar of pale April sunlight that struck through the window upon a little panniered shepherdess in the Arcadian fields.

Down the hall the doctor passed in a stride to his own especial room to the left at the back, where light was not robbed by the deep Doric front porch. He flung open the door.

"There," he said, and the child passed in. No one could have called it a cheerful room. It was dark, but it was quiet and restful, and, once there, it put the visitor into a receptive mood for all it suggested and contained. Something of this the

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child felt as John pressed her into a deep, blue-covered settle before the wood-fire.

"Sit down and get warm."

He felt her little hands with his firm, skilled fingers. "You're cold, chilled. I'll be back in a minute." He left her — anything that he could do was so little!

He returned with a steaming glass on a tray. She shook her head, turning away.

"Oh, yes," he said coaxingly. "You've had no breakfast. Why, I made it! I would not let Martha!"

She looked up into his face. "Must I?"

"You must."

She took the glass and drank it slowly. "It's very good," she said with a little gasp. "Thank you very much." Then she sat still again, her hands clasped in her lap, her black hair falling about her pale face.

For a moment he stood gazing down on her, then, bending over her, he laid his hand firmly on hers.

"I must go. Keep warm and" — he waited for her to look up and held her grey eyes sternly with his own of clear blue — "do not cry. I shall be back soon."

He turned and went out quickly. In the hall he met Miss Adams, hovering about ineffectually. He stopped, speaking kindly. "Go to Jean Dimmock, Cousin Roxina. She is in my study. Talk to her — keep her from thinking if you can. On no account

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mention anything that has taken place. I shall be back as soon as possible."

The buggy was waiting. He climbed in, and in a moment, after stopping at the parsonage to assure Beena of Jean's safety, turned the horses' heads towards the distant cemetery.

CHAPTER III

MISS ROXINA approached the door of the study with misgivings. The minister's child had never been easy to know, a shy child with a self-possession that embarrassed such elders as made well-meaning but perfunctory advances.

"She looks at you so," Miss Roxina thought helplessly; "I am sure that I don't know what to say."

But her kind heart overcame her self-conscious fears, and repeating to herself the encouraging words, "Poor child — the poor child," she entered the study and trotted quietly down the room, with her mending-basket on her arm. She tried to look cheerful, but not too cheerful, and to give an everyday tone to her voice as she said: —

"I have brought my work in to be with you, my dear. I have so much mending. Cousin John is very hard on his clothes."

Jean, shrinking from sympathy, raised hostile eyes, but, reading with a child's keenness the nervousness in the old lady's face, her expression changed as she rose.

"May I help you?" Her voice was toneless, but her manner was polite.

"That's a nice little girl. 'Spose we sit in the ends of the settee with the basket between us. You might wind this worsted. I have been meanin' to

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do it." She paused. A child in such sorrow — it hardly seemed natural to ask it.

The child read her thought. "I'd like to," she said, and sat down primly, her hands full of the soft tangle of coloured wools.

Miss Roxina took heart to babble on. "This room is always so pleasant. I am not often here. It's the doctor's private room — not his consulting-room. It's a very good idea, I think, to have the office and dispensary in a separate building. It was Cousin James's — that's Cousin John's father — who had the building erected when he took the practice here, fifty years ago."

She kept an eye on the child, whose deft fingers wrought among the vividly coloured tangled skeins.

"That's how it came to be built in the corner of the garden with the entrance on Lower Street. You see, fifty years ago it was considered below a gentleman's dignity to be a doctor of medicine. Cousin James's father did not approve, but Cousin James would do it, and as a compromise, to keep the business of it out of his home, he built the office. Things have changed in fifty years. No one said anything when Cousin John wanted to be a doctor. Of course he is a deal cleverer than his father. So young and yet he has written a book that has been translated into French and German!"

The child looked up. There was a faint, a very faint contempt in her mind for this rather silly old lady. As if she had not known for ages about the

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doctor and the doctor's cleverness and the doctor's book! Had she not listened unnoticed for hours together, while her father and her mother and the doctor talked and talked!

At the memory, her hands shut hard on the wool. But the doctor had said that she must not cry. She would not. Miss Roxina Adams was talking steadily.

"Do you see all that bookcase over there? The one by the door — it is full of French and German books. Cousin John is very well-educated. He can read them without a dictionary. I often see him. He sets great store on his books. He's always buying more, though, as I say to Martha, he never can have read all he's got. But he keeps buying. There's a stack on that table now — all new ones he has n't had time to look into. Books and fishin' — those are his hobbies — and harmless enough they are for a young man — for he is young, dear. Thirty-one on his last birthday. You never would have said at eighteen that he'd sober down as he has. John was a wild boy. Cousin James — his father — was very anxious. No harm — but he was always getting into scrapes — and he had a name at college for his mad goings on — yet folks have learned to trust him here. They do set a heap of store by him now. He don't get much time for fishin'. Those are his rods in the corner and his flies in that Chinese cabinet, and he has n't taken 'em out in I don't know when." She paused, but getting no response from the bent

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head she hurried on. "Yes — I do like this room. Yet I don't know why. It is too dark. As I tell him, a new red carpet instead of this old rug —"

"Oh!" Jean exclaimed.

The old lady paused. "You like it? It's a dingy-looking old thing, I think. The colour's all faded out. Blue's a funny colour for curtains, too, as dark a blue as that — Yet it's a real homey room for sittin', is n't it? The best parlour now *is* a handsome room. Those gentlemen who study old houses are always travelling here to see it. One came only last week from Buffalo — said it was the finest fireplace outside Virginia. It is n't used much. My sitting-room is upstairs."

She stopped for a moment to cast a glance at the child bent over the worsted and went on, launched upon her favourite topic.

"Of course his family think, my dear, that he is wasted here in Tacitus. When I was in Boston in the winter, I was with his sister, Mrs. Winthrop Gray, she that was Marian Erskine. Such a beautiful house they have! Or rather two, I should say, one on Beacon Street, and a great country house at Pride's Crossing, with thirty bedrooms and a tiled bathroom for every two! You never saw anything like it! It must have taken millions to build. And full of the most wonderful things. Pictures and — well, I can't begin to tell you —" her blue-veined hands flew at the memory. "They were so kind to me. You see, I am only Mrs. James Erskine's (John's

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mother's) second cousin by marriage, so really no relation to the Erskines. But the first families are like that, I have found. They are proud enough, you see, to acknowledge all their poor relations. Every tree has some low branches, so old Madam Erskine — that's Cousin John's grandmother — used to say. She had a grand way, too, when she said it." The old lady paused. "Where was I? Oh, about Cousin John. His sister, and all of them said, when I was there, what a shame it was that he should waste himself in this village when he might be famous in New York or Boston or abroad. They said he was a real Quixote."

In the joy of the topic which was dearest to her — John and his family — Cousin Roxina had forgotten that Jean was the minister's child, that she was a mourner, bereft.

"You see, his idea was, that a man owes a duty to his own country and place, and that's why he came back." She paused to cast her eyes on Jean, little knowing that the child had heard this very subject discussed between the doctor and her parents, and leaned nearer, looking over her glasses.

"Why are you leaving the red wool, dear?"

"I — don't like it. It is so — unpleasant."

Miss Roxina Adams could not believe her ears. "Unpleasant!" She laid her hand over the wool, gathering it up and patting Jean's hand soothingly. "There, we've had enough of work."

"But I have not finished," the child protested.

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"I'd rather finish; truly I was just keeping the red till the end. I'd really like to finish. It's so horrid leaving things half-done. Please."

Miss Roxina was puzzled, but the firm, slender hands had taken possession of the wool again, and Jean with lowered head was tackling the tangle of violent red.

"That red that you don't like," Miss Roxina went on, "the doctor don't like either. I had it by mistake, from Boston with a packet of other wools."

Jean looked up gravely. "If it was mine," she said, "I would burn it."

"Burn it!" Miss Roxina looked thoroughly shocked. "It will make a nice warm comforter for some poor child," she said reprovingly.

Jean sat back in her corner, the ball of wool wound in her hand. She looked at it. It was hideous. The other colours hated it so. She buried it out of sight at the bottom of the basket, arranging the other balls on top.

Miss Roxina's thoughts had returned to the glories of Boston. She had forgotten Jean, till recalled by her voice.

"Have you anything else that I can do? To help? I can sew quite well, so" — she stopped — mother had said — she gulped it down — "so please let me." She spoke quickly, for thoughts were hammering at the back of her brain. What was happening? What was happening? Where had the doctor gone? Who were talking in those darkened rooms across the way?

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What were they saying? What had they found? What was happening?

Suddenly all triviality became intolerable. She started up. "I must go," she faltered. "I can't talk — I can't do anything."

The old lady rose. The child's misery was apparent. John had once said that the minister's child was highly strung, sensitive, delicate.

"I think," she said, alarmed, "you had better come with me. The doctor seems late, and you're tired."

"No — no —" a rush of words interrupted. "I'll wait here — I'm not tired. I'm really not. I don't mind being alone. I'd rather. I shall be all right. Please let me wait here."

Troubled and not at all understanding, yet with sense enough to know that the child should not be crossed, the old lady gathered up her work and departed in a flutter.

Once alone, the child sat down in the armchair, propped her elbows upon the writing-table, put her thumbs in her ears, her fingers pressed against her eyes, and stoically waited. The time seemed interminable.

Finally the door opened and closed abruptly. A decided footfall crossed the floor and Jean started up as John Erskine reached her side. He read all the signs of tension in her. He laid a firm hand on the thin shoulder, yet the touch was gentle.

"You may cry now, my child," he said in a deep, choked voice. "You *must* cry."

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The understanding broke her self-control. Blinded by tears she threw herself face downward among the cushions of the blue settle and John Erskine sank on his knees on the floor beside her.

CHAPTER IV

THE sewing-circle of the Unitarian Church of Tacitus met in Maria Beebe's parlour on the very day after Mr. Dimmock's funeral. The date had been set some weeks ago, before the tragedy, and no one thought of changing it.

At half-past two the hostess stood in the centre of the room, giving a final look around her before the arrival of her guests. A satisfied smile rested on her harsh, hard-featured face. The room symbolised to her ambitious soul much of conflict and hard endeavour, crowned by success.

It was she, not her husband, who had invested an unexpected legacy in the store across the street. It was her shrewdness and economy which had built up the business until the stock was so varied and well chosen that the Tacitus people seldom needed to journey to the neighbouring town of Attica to supply their wants. For twenty years she had kept the books and waited behind the counter and been content with rooms above the store, and it was finally she who had stepped in and, before any one in the county knew what had happened, had bought the old Vanderveld house and its contents. Since that day, she had been no more seen at the store. She had realised the fitness of things, and now rocked on her own piazza overlooking the street, in chairs that had

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belonged to her betters, or sat on winter evenings in old Madame Vanderveld's parlour, grimly exultant, little knowing how out of place she looked in her surroundings.

Now, as she glanced about the room it was not the shape or colour of the old mahogany furniture that pleased her, — though she was sharp enough to rate it at its commercial value, — but her own efforts at “brightening up”; knitted mats of coloured wool lay on the shelves of the Chippendale cupboard, under small blue vases of paper flowers, scarves, which she called “throws,” hid the beautiful grain and polish of tables and chair-backs, a plush lambrequin of peacock blue obscured the simple lines of the high white mantel, and Nottingham lace curtains draped the windows. It looked right to Maria, and she smoothed down the folds of her dress with quick nervous pats of content as she hurried to intercept her new Irish servant on her way to the front door.

“Bridget,” she said, “if it’s Mrs. Donner, show her up to the best bedroom to lay off her things. If it is only Miss Meeks, she can take ’em off in the hall.”

Red-headed Bridget paused, gaping, —

“An’ if it be’ant ayther?”

The bell sounded again. Without answering, Maria somewhat grandly waved Bridget on to the door and withdrew. She had a sense of social values that could not only distinguish between people, but communities, and which had led her from the fold of the Methodist Church in Lower Street to that of the

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Unitarian Church which stood between the old Vanderveld house and the parsonage on Upper Street. The Unitarian Church was tacitly acknowledged to be the most genteel. It had arisen on the demand and on the endowment of a generation of Erskines who had shared the mental awakening in the fifties, and who insisted upon worshipping the one God as a proof of their intellectual selectness. Of this Maria knew nothing. Indeed, her taste preferred the vigorous prayers and exhortations and the lusty singing in the small theatre-like room of the brown Methodist Church to the colder methods and formulas of the service in the Unitarian Church, whose spired whiteness, spaced by tall green shuttered windows and shaded by giant elms, did not appeal to her taste.

The door opened and her first guest entered; neither Mrs. Donner nor Miss Meeks, the village dressmaker, but Mrs. Spiller, the wife of the undertaker.

Mrs. Spiller was small and gentle. Her grey hair was parted over a timid face. She was dressed in black. She was on the outer edge of Mrs. Beebe's circle and was accorded a correspondingly cool welcome. She was overpowered at being the first to arrive, sat down in the chair indicated by Maria's thin and knotted forefinger, folded her cotton-gloved hands in her lap, and wished that some one else would come. She answered Maria's condescending questions about her husband and children, and then, as the conversation languished, she ventured a remark: —

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"Sad events have been happenin' in our midst."

"Very," Maria answered in a tone of stern disapproval, which sounded as if she felt Mr. and Mrs. Dimmock's deaths as an intentional affront to herself. She picked up her crocheting and looked out of the window with severe lips. She did not wish to touch upon this subject until she had a more select audience.

Mrs. Spiller felt snubbed, grew hot all over, remembered that Mrs. Beebe "was n't anybody, after all," tried to profit by the assurance to stiffen her backbone, but failed when she found that lady's cold eye again upon her, and the two remained silent until the door opened to admit several women who came together.

As might have been expected in a village where sensations were few, the meeting was the largest of the year. The parlour was full of women who gradually drew into groups and settled down to sew — in the dining-room the cutting-out committee was busy chattering over the table. But the corner of the elect was certainly the bow window where Maria sat surrounded. The small group about her spoke low, but with sufficient vehemence to silence the canary in the gilded cage above their heads. They recounted the story of Mr. Dimmock's murder with subdued dissimulated gusto, embellishing their facts with many flights of gruesome fancy, and not until every detail had been rehearsed and debated did they pause.

"What makes me the maddest," Maria declared,

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spots of red burning on her high cheek-bones, "is that them as did it's going to get away."

"Yes," Mrs. Donner agreed with a sigh, laying down her work. "I b'lieve they be." She was very stout and breathless. "I b'lieve they be."

"There is n't a clue," Maria went on, frowning slightly at Mrs. Donner's grammatical slip. Her own English was far from perfect, but she had corrected the more glaring faults current in Tacitus speech. "Not a clue, so Mr. Beebe says."

"Mr. Donner says the same," Mrs. Donner corroborated, creaking in her chair. "The perlice down to Attica have n't anything to work on. It does n't seem right, nohow, that they should get off scot-free, whoever they be."

Lillian Vincent, a refined-looking girl of twenty, whose outlook on life was wider than that of the others, and who felt vaguely ashamed of the relish with which her companions pursued the conversation, looked up.

"I hope," she said, "that it's true that Jean does not know. Mother was at the house this morning and Martha told her that Dr. Erskine had forbidden the subject to be mentioned in the house."

Maria sniffed. "It won't be possible to keep it from her," she said acidly. "Sooner or later she's bound to hear, and it had better be sooner, I think. It's all very well, while she's visitin' him, — you know she's been sleepin' there since it happened, — but when she leaves — then what?"

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"Don't you know?" Lillian asked quickly.

The needles hung suspended. All the eyes were fixed upon her.

"What?"

"She is to live with the doctor," she said.

"For the Lord's sake," Mrs. Donner gasped.

The silence of the other ladies was no less eloquent.

"To live?" asked Miss Meeks in an incredulous voice.

Maria bridled. "Are you sure, Lillian Vincent?" she asked.

Lillian smiled. "Yes, sure," she said. "I thought every one knew. Martha told mother. The doctor saw Jean's only relation, a cousin from New York, after the funeral yesterday."

"The man with the grey mustache," wheezed Mrs. Donner.

"I wondered who he was," Miss Meeks added.

"What else did Martha say?" Mrs. Beebe asked impatiently.

Lillian laughed. "Nothing — except how good the doctor is, of course. It was such a chance for her, the poor dear."

The other needles had resumed their course, but Maria's was still paralysed.

"But Beena?" she asked, still incredulous.

"Beena is going back to New England after the packing is done. Poor Beena — I don't think she could stand Tacitus without Mrs. Dimmock."

Maria sniffed audibly and disdainfully.

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"Tacitus can't stand her," she said angrily. "The airs the woman puts on."

Lillian looked up, protesting.

"But she was so devoted to them. It's sad, I think. She seems quite broken since it happened."

"On the contrary," Maria cried maliciously, "I thought I had never seen her as stiff as she was yesterday, and there at the head of the coffin, too, as if she was one of the family."

"She was with Jean," Lillian cried indignantly.

"Well, did you notice Jean?" Miss Meeks put in with bated breath, bending across her work and peering around the little circle. Then as she met denial, "What, you did n't?"

"What?" they all cried.

Miss Meeks emitted the breath. "Of all things! Do you mean to say that I was the only one who noticed?" She was delighted. Long experience had made her proficient in the art of creating these small effects. Her audience was breathless.

"It was during the discourse," she began impressively; "and I must say that I never heard a finer funeral oration. I was sitting — p'r'aps you saw — close to the family and p'r'aps the end of the coffin cut Jean off from the rest of the room — for I could just see her. Well, — will you believe it? — when the minister got to the part where he rehearsed the deceased's virtues, as a husband and a father — all that, it was beautiful — Jean — put her fingers in her ears!"

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A shocked chorus greeted her words.

"An unnatural child," Mrs. Donner said, fatly solemn.

Lillian looked helpless and uncomfortable.

"Are you sure, Miss Meeks?" she said.

"I am always most careful in my statements, Miss Vincent. A person in my position, goin' from house to house, has to be."

"It was because she was so unhappy," Lillian said.

"Unhappy!" Maria's tone was sharp. "It ought to have comforted her to hear the praise of her dead father. I agree with Mrs. Donner."

"She was always odd," Lillian said weakly.

"The time I had making that black dress of hers," Miss Meeks went on. "She told me it was wicked to wear black clothes—that the heathen somewhere were more Christian than us."

"What?" cried the fat voice of Mrs. Donner, shocked again.

"Because they don't wear mourning," Miss Meeks explained.

Lillian bit her lip, pushed her chair back slightly, folding her work.

Maria was not dull. She took the hint and rose.

"Have you heard, ladies?" she said, turning sharply to the roomful of women. "Little Jean Dimmock is to live with Dr. Erskine."

The Babel of excited surprise was only ended with the appearance of Bridget heralding the food.

CHAPTER V

It could hardly have been chance which led young Rufus Haines, the schoolmaster, past Maria Beebe's just as the ladies of the sewing-circle were leaving, since in so small a place as Tacitus a function so important was known to the most retiring inhabitant.

And Rufus Haines was far from retiring. As he blithely put it to himself, he was out for all he could get, whether it were work or play, in the shape of a scrub baseball game in the lower "lot," a choir practice, or a talk with a pretty girl. Just now his eyes were very busy under the brim of his stiff hat, as he watched for Lillian Vincent and timed his pace to exactly come up with her as she came down the steps. Then, with no lack of confidence, he saluted her.

"Good-evening, Miss Vincent. Been sewing for the heathen? May I walk a little way with you?"

"Good-evening." Lillian's face flushed pink. "Yes — no — that is, not the heathen." She was conscious that Mrs. Donner, who was wheezing down behind her, had heard the blithe request.

But young Haines had already seen the farmer's wife, and with his usual smiling sureness had turned with a word of apology from Lillian to the older woman.

"Let me help you into the buggy, ma'am." His

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ready word and laugh had already made him, though a newcomer, a favourite in Tacitus. Mrs. Donner, though jealous for her absent son at this moment, found herself turning an indulgent eye upon him, as, having assisted her into the waiting vehicle, he placed the reins in her fat hands.

"Don't let him run away with you," he said gaily, and his manner made the very mild joke amusing. She nodded her thanks to him as she spoke to Lillian.

"How's your ma, Lillian? Now that the spring's comin' you must spend the day with us. Bring your sewin'! The men-folks are awful busy takin' in the old wood lot, though I say the farm's big enough for us and our children. But Dave will have it; Dave is sot."

"By the way," Mr. Haines broke in, "ask your son to be sure not to miss choir practice on Saturday night. We'll have the whole Sunday service on our shoulders and he has the best voice of the bunch."

Mrs. Donner stiffened, starting her horse. "I 'low he's comin'," she said drily. "If not 't will be the first choir practice his mother's ever known him to miss. Night, Lillian." She flapped the reins and drove away.

Young Haines whistled. "Did n't like my taking command, did she?"

"You can't blame her," Lillian answered, laughing. "After all, Mr. Rufus Haines has only been in Tacitus — let me see — six months, is it?"

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"Oh, come now, Miss Vincent. It's nearly a year."

"Well, a year, then. But David has kept the choir together for years. He never seems to lead because he never says anything."

"Not like yours truly, eh, Miss Vincent?" the young man spoke ruefully. "I s'pose I am a talker. Oh, Dave's a fine fellow." His voice was less enthusiastic now.

Lillian noticed it and changed the subject.

"Have you heard about Jean Dimmock?"

They were crossing the square to the road which ran out on the other side where in a small green-shuttered white cottage Lillian lived with her mother.

"What? Not more trouble, I hope?"

"On the contrary. She is going to live with Dr. Erskine."

Rufus Haines stopped short. "Say, you know," he exclaimed, "ain't he great! I call that blamed fine! Takin' that kid. What's he want with a kid in the house? He's white, he is!" His tone of whole-hearted admiration spoke more forcibly than his words. "Yes, sir," he ended up, "he's a man — all wool and a yard wide."

"I had n't thought of it like that," Lillian said. "I suppose it would be rather a sacrifice for a young man — taking her. Somehow, Dr. Erskine —"

"Of course it's a sacrifice," the other declared; "especially for a physician who wants the little time

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he's got at home free. But I suppose he felt he wanted to do it. Mr. and Mrs. Dimmock were friends of his, were n't they? He'll miss them."

"Yes, indeed," Lillian agreed gravely; "he will miss them. I never knew Mr. Dimmock much, but I got to know Mrs. Dimmock a little when I first came back from school. I admired her more than any one I have ever known, I think."

"She was always the lady," Rufus Haines agreed, "and was nice to look at."

"Was n't she?" Lillian's voice was low. "I loved everything about her. Her smooth, black hair and great dark eyes and her small head. Jean is just like her. And her hands, and her nice way of doing things, and her dresses." A lump rose in her throat. "She was awfully good to me. I shall never forget it."

"Trust you," he said kindly.

"You know the story about her family, don't you?" she went on. "Her grandfather was a Spanish noble. When he was a young man he had something to do with the first Carlist rising and escaped to America to save his life. He fell in love with a New England girl and married her and settled in Salem. It's from him that Mrs. Dimmock, and Jean, too, I suppose, get their black hair and pale complexions." She paused. "Mr. Dimmock had terrible moods. When I heard he was dead, the first thing I thought was that he's killed himself."

"No," the young man said, "it was murder right

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enough. But, say, this is n't very gay. I did n't ask to walk home with you to talk about other people. Let's drop it. We are much more interesting to ourselves than any one else can be. Is n't that so?"

"Oh, but how selfish!"

"Of course. But, look here, don't you think, if you are truthful, that every one is selfish?"

"Oh, no!" Lillian protested. "Look at my mother!"

"Oh, but she has you. Seems to me you'd make any one unselfish."

"How absurd. Oh, Mr. Haines, I've got that song you spoke of the other day."

"Good!" His boyish face was round and ruddily handsome and his brown eyes sparkled. "When will you sing it for me?"

Lillian paused at the door. "Are you busy this evening?"

"Busy!" he laughed frankly and ruefully, showing white teeth.

"Then come in about half-past seven. We can have some music together."

"Right-o! That'll be corking. Good-night. Regards to your mother." He lifted his hat and walked off with a quick, light step, humming, as Lillian opened the door and went in.

Mrs. Vincent sat by the centre table, which was set for supper, working by the red-globed central lamp. She was a slight, sweet-faced, sentimental

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woman of forty-five whose life was centred in her daughter.

Nursing an innocent but fervent ambition for the girl, she had spent most of her small capital in sending her away to school and lived in the daily expectation of the moment when by some wizardry of circumstance Lillian should fulfil her hopes.

Like most sentimentalists Mrs. Vincent closed her eyes to facts. She did not see that no voyage into the unknown would ever lure Lillian. She did not realise that the unexpected comes only to those who breathlessly expect, and that Lillian never expected. Ignorant of the predestined baulking of her ambitions, Mrs. Vincent looked up smiling.

"What a nice breath of fresh air you bring in. Well, were there many there? Who came to the door with you?"

"Mr. Haines. I asked him in this evening."

The mother did not respond, so the girl went on, as she took off her things, with a shade of contempt in her voice, "Of course, there was a crowd. And, of course, they all talked of one thing. It made me ashamed. Mrs. Beebe is really dreadful; Mrs. Donner was about as bad, but she's such a dear old thing, somehow you know there's no malice in her, and you don't mind."

"Was Miss Roxina there?"

"No. I told you she would n't go. She does not mind a bit of gossip, but after all she is a lady and she can't stand Maria Beebe any more than you

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can. All the church people were there. She gave us good refreshments — angel cake, not as light as yours, but good — and sponge and fruit and tea and chocolate. Oh, it was very grand.”

“Shall you change your dress?” her mother called, as Lillian went out to put away her hat and coat, “or keep on what you’ve got, since Mr. Haines is coming?”

Lillian’s voice came laughingly back from the stairs, “Of course I’m going to change. I can’t waste my best dress on him.”

CHAPTER VI

A THRILLING sense of living, of the unusual in the happenings in which she was involved, did much to help the child Jean Dimmock to fight the desolating grief of those early days. The sense of drama was strong in her, and an objective Jean was ever before her eyes playing her part in a moving spectacle. There was none of the grown-up, conscious pride in peculiar misfortune in her attitude, but a sense of exhilaration as of swift movement after stagnation.

When, after the funeral, she knew that she was to continue to live, for the present, anyway, in the house across the road, a glow, born of her vivid imagination, enveloped her, and sent the colour to her face. She stood looking up at John Erskine with shining eyes. The cousin from New York did not feel that it was necessary to ask if she was pleased. Now, twenty-four hours having served to turn novelty into accepted fact, other thoughts had begun to stir, all centring about the man who sat at his writing-table near her.

He was not thinking of her, had hardly seemed to notice her when she came in, — and she took advantage of this, to stare, with a child's frank scrutiny, her book neglected in her lap.

She wondered why she liked so much to look at

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him. He was not handsome. His hair was thick and short and dark. His forehead was square and his eyebrows broad and thick, with up-and-down lines between them. His eyes were very blue, — sometimes hard and sometimes very kind. His nose was nice, high-bridged and strong, but his upper lip was long and scarcely indented. The mouth was clever, the chin strong with a cleft in it.

No — he was not handsome and Jean loved beauty. “But there’s something that makes me want to look at him,” she said to herself, gazing with her chin on her hand over the arm of the deep armchair. “He looks as if he could make any one do anything,” she decided. “That’s why he’s nice to look at; wobbly people are horrid, even when they are handsome.”

And she was to live with him. He, not her cousin, she felt, had decided it. But why? Something, a little sinking certainty, told her that it was from no especial interest in herself. He had paid her less attention than any of the people who came — over there. He had never talked to her, had nodded without smiling when he came in, and had sat quickly down to talk with her parents. Her sad little face wore a puzzled frown. It was very odd — why had he asked her? Perhaps he did not really want her — perhaps — no one in the whole world really wanted her!

John Erskine moved, frowned, threw back his shoulders which stooped, lifted his head and became

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aware of the child's fixed regard, of the grey eyes' grave, pained enquiry. He frowned again.

"What is it?" The question was abrupt, weary.

The child started. "I was only thinking."

She saw him make an effort, then the stern mouth smiled. "Thinking of what? You know we are to be friends, Jean. The first principle of friendship is liberty — liberty of thought, and of speech — and above all of silence. You are to talk when you like, be silent when you like. But I am interested in your thoughts and I expect you to be interested in mine."

She nodded. "I don't mind telling you," she began. "I think I was thinking, first, that that man, my cousin, did not try to pretend that he wanted me, and I was wondering how it would have felt to have had to go with him. And then I was thinking whether *you* really wanted me" — the small figure was erect, quivering, the small face white and set. "Do you?"

"Do I?" There was an instant's pause. His face was very kind, but his voice changed suddenly to the peremptory sternness which his patients knew as he answered firmly, "I do. You hear? I do." Then his tone changed to kindness again. "I forbid you to ask yourself that question. I want you. For yourself, because we are to be friends, and — for other things. You believe me?"

She drew a long breath. "Yes — thank you."

Her prim little manner delighted him.

"That was all?" He felt for his pipe. There was

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silence. The pipe found and filled and lighted, he glanced at her. "Was that all you were thinking?"

She coloured vividly under his scrutiny.

"Something else? Come, let us have it."

She paused, drew a long breath as if taking courage, then hurried on. "It was only about yesterday. I was afraid — I thought, perhaps, — oh, it's so hard to explain. But if you noticed what I did, perhaps you thought something that was not so — but the minister did n't know *him* and he said such a lot of silly things — I *could n't* listen — I could n't bear it — and so —"

"Don't explain," John said quickly. "You are quite right. It was pretty bad — I felt it."

But started, she could not stop. "You see, he said things that were not *true*. And to speak silly lies, to be polite at a funeral —" She choked, pounding the sofa with her thin fists. "I hated it — I hated it. When I had my fingers in my ears I could n't hear."

"Quite so; I understand."

She drew a deep breath. "No one else could," she said with conviction.

John Erskine smiled. "Perhaps no one else there." He was glad, since he had determined to take this child into his house, that she was not ordinary, not quite of common clay. John Erskine had a quiet, ingrained pride in his name, his position, in all that was his; since Jean must be his, it was well if he could discern in her future cause for pride.

"Is that all?" he asked, with a new interest.

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She nodded, then took a step forward. "I don't know how to thank you," she said simply.

His trouble seemed to return at her words.

"Thank me! There can be no thanks from you to me! Never mention it again, if you wish to please me. Your parents were — my friends." There was a moment's pause. "Are you quite comfortable in your new rooms? Cousin Roxina says you like the four-poster bed. Are you sure?" His tone was delightfully kind. "Because little girls sometimes have fancies — one of my sisters now — her name is Marian —"

"Mrs. Winthrop Gray?"

"The same — well, when she was little she hated four-posters. She mistrusted that ruffle round the bottom and she did n't like the curtains at the head. So my mother gave her a little bedstead — it is up in the attic still — you may have it if you like."

"Oh, but I love the four-poster." The child was vivid. "Indeed, I do. I imagine it's a ship sailing me away, all the sails set and bellowing —"

"Billowing?"

She laughed. "Billowing in the wind. It's splendid. Certainly, I like it."

"Good," he agreed. "I have always felt rather that way myself about them. But you'll find there's a lot to feel about in this old house."

"I know." She nodded. "Oh, I've always known." She stopped short. She would not tell him that yet. The thought came with a hurting sense of disloyalty. That house across the street, where they had lived,

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— she had left it. Beena had not left it. Beena was there now — alone. To-morrow she had heard them say that Beena would have much to do —

John Erskine saw the renewed trouble which eclipsed the momentary glow in her face.

“Yes?” he said.

“I like it here,” she faltered, “but Beena is over there — alone — and I must go and help.”

“There is no need of that. It will be very hard for you. You don’t know how hard — I do.”

“But if Beena can, I can.” She looked up at him with pleading eyes. “You won’t forbid it, will you? I can do anything that I must do, and I truly must do that. I’d feel like a coward if I did n’t. May I?”

“If you think it will make you happier afterwards.”

She nodded. “I hate being happy by not going. I’d rather go — if it hurt more’n it will, I’d go.”

He held out his hand with frank approval.

“You are right,” he said. “You must go.”

CHAPTER VII

So Jean shared with Beena the pang and the shudder, helping as well as she could, leaving all practical decisions to the woman. Hardly less silent than Beena herself, she followed the old servant in her methodical work of sorting and packing Mary Dimmock's effects. There was a grimness in the Scotchwoman's grief, an austerity in her bereavement, that appealed to some chord of latent stoicism in the child.

She knew that Beena had worshipped her mother, and she saw that Beena neither wept nor lamented, though her grizzled hair had whitened and her face had thinned till high cheek-bones and jaws showed through the weather-beaten skin. She saw Beena go doggedly about her sad business and she followed as doggedly. No weakness of sentiment was allowed, but the child felt the deep and silent agony of the old woman as she drew from wardrobe and cupboard and lavendered drawer the garments that had been hung and folded so carefully by Mary's orderly hands. Simple things at the best, for the minister's wife was not rich, yet holding in every line and fold, in their feel and breath, the spirit of her who had fashioned and worn them.

Who has not known that silent, wordless appeal

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of things? — things which in all their inanimation yet live and touch and wound and torture and — alas! — upbraid.

In the old attic under the eaves — in the old attic with its sweet and musty smell — stood trunks which had come from Mary's New England home; big, square packing-cases, cedar-lined, containing a strange collection of garments whose value was less intrinsic than reminiscent, though among the faded finery were folded long capes of mink, ermines yellowed by time, sunshades with finely carved ivory sticks, shawls of China crêpe heavy with embroidery, and quaint boxes full of laces. Small hair trunks studded with brass nails were there, too, filled with papers, letters, old daybooks where entries told of a wider life, Bibles whose stained paper carried a family record of generations concisely contained under births and deaths; hat-boxes gay with striped and flowered paper, holding still the calash of the eighteenth century, and the caps of the early nineteenth; great pigskin valises which, when opened, showed brave linings of scarlet morocco, gold-tooled — cases of books, unopened for a decade.

"All this," Beena said, looking round upon it coldly, masking her misery, "is of no value to any but the mistress. The doctor won't wish them to be cluttering up his attic. They had best be burned — or part — and the rest put into the sale. She brought every old thing from the attic at home. They be of no value to any but she."

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"Oh, Beena, but I like them so," Jean objected for the first time in a low voice.

"It's trumpery — I told the mistress 't was trumpery clutterin' up the attic. What with the old boxes, and the old baskets and all —"

Jean had fallen on her knees before a small hair trunk which opened its rounded top to her pressure. Her fingers, wandering among the contents, lifting and putting down papers, fell upon a small oblong box of bright green embossed paper, tied around by a faded ribbon. Sinking down on the floor, she untied it, and opened the box. Inside was what? A tiny bunch of immortelles tied with a bit of faded pink silk, a small square yellowed folded paper holding a ring of baby's hair and an old mourning ring. Some one had put them there, tied them up softly, relics so precious — of what? She replaced the box quickly and rose —

"I shall keep them all, Beena," she said quietly, — "all. These things and the clock and — I shall go now to the doctor and ask him."

She walked to the attic stairs and went down. Beena followed her lumberingly.

Jean, intent on her request, passed the door of her father's room without a tremor, found the broad hall, passed out of the front door, crossed the road, and made straight for the doctor's house and the study. There she opened the door and looked in. He was there. She closed the door quietly and waited. John Erskine looked up from his desk.

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“Well.”

She did not notice or at least answer his smile. She was too grave.

“What can I have from my house?” The question was abrupt. “Beena says that the things in the attic are trumpery. I like trumpery. I want them all.”

“What is it you want, — what?”

She shook her head, thinking of the little green box. “I want it all — all in the attic; and if you please, I want more, I want the clock and I want —” She stopped — all that her mother had loved she wanted. But that was the house itself — yes, and the barberry bush under the dining-room window and the birds that nested there. Where should she stop? How leave it all? How could it support its abandonment? Things that must not speak can feel. Her two thin little hands worked together. If she could only explain her dilemma. She must have the little green box, and then how would the other papers feel, and if she took the whole trunk, the other trunks would so hate being left. To be sure, the clock was the soul of downstairs, to be chosen before the tables or cupboard — but there were the chairs — the lady’s chair and the father’s chair. She grew white.

“Oh, please help me,” she faltered. “It all wants to come. I can’t take it all. And it hurts so —”

“But you can take it all.” His tone was firm and arresting. “Jeanie, no one can ever take any part

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of it from you. Don't you see? It's all yours as it used to be — with them there. If you brought every stick of the house away, you would still leave it — don't you see?"

Her eyes widened, answering his thought.

"We lose nothing that we wish to keep." He rose. "Shall I walk back with you, and then we shall see what you shall bring, as a key, let us say, to all the rest."

She nodded. Unless carried away by her interest, she was chary of speech.

"It's the clock I want most," she said slowly with diffidence, as they reached the house. "It cares the most, I think, and the chairs — their chairs — you know. But then if I look, all the rest begs and wants to come, too," — her voice broke. "It does, truly."

Together they went up the steps and entered the door.

"There's nothing in the parlour," she said quickly. "But in the sitting-room there's lots."

"Let us see," he said gravely.

He forced himself to enter. Robert and Mary Dimmock surely would be seated in the light of the student lamp before the fire. A shudder passed over him — used as he was to death — as the face of the dead minister rose before him.

But the room was empty. In the deepening twilight the high white mantel with its narrow shelf showed lightest, and the big, white panelled cup-

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board doors. There was no fire. The room struck cold, unfriendly. Jean felt it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "they do not want to come."

"No," he echoed gravely, "they do not want to come."

As they crossed the room they were reflected in the tall old gilt-framed mirror between the windows. They passed close to the end of the horse-hair and rosewood couch, where Mary's soft, bright-coloured rug lay folded. Above on the wall, dimly seen, hung a coloured engraving, "The Entry of Washington into New York in 1778." Though Jean was never tired of gazing at it, on the great general in blue on his prancing white horse, on the red Indians in the crowd on the pavement, on the ladies in powdered hair and silks and laces on the balconies, she did not give it a glance now, but hurriedly led the way into the dining-room. The doctor shut the door behind them. The dining-room was even darker than the room left behind, but warmer; embers were red on the hearth, the tall clock ticked slowly, ponderously, friendlily.

Jean drew a long breath.

"Only the clock and the things in the attic, please," she said.

"You are right, I think," he answered, still grave. "Now, will you say good-night to Beena and come back with me? it is time for your supper."

They were in the hall where it was quite dark. He could not see her face, but he felt her hesitation.

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"May I — could you wait while I just run up to the attic for a minute — only a minute?" Without waiting for an answer, she disappeared — and he was left alone.

The door behind him opened. Beena stood on the threshold.

"I thought I heard some one," she said, regarding him steadily.

"But I thought you were in the attic," he answered. "Miss Jean has just run up there to say good-night to you."

"Not to me," she said grimly.

Flying feet were coming down the stairs; a little rush, and Jean appeared with one of her sudden transitions, radiant. She flung her arms round Beena's neck. "Good-night," she said breathlessly, "good-night." In another moment she was out of the front door into the still, crisp April air.

"I told them," she said. Her tone was exultant. Through the stuff of her skirt she could feel the little green box in her pocket.

That night, after Martha had tucked her in the four-poster bed, she rose in the dark, slipped on her dressing-gown, and softly lighted the candles on the dressing-table. From a desk in the corner she carefully brought pen and ink. Then, from under the valance of the bed, where she had hidden it, she produced her treasure.

She sat down at the dressing-table with it in her hands. She untied the silver string and took off the

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cover. Already the sweet, musty smell of it was familiar. The white lining of the cover was yellowed, splotched with pale brown mildew. She laid it aside, looking with soft eyes at the contents. She lifted the tiny bunch of immortelles. They were soft and fuzzy and smelled more mustily sweet. The thin pink ribbon that tied them was faded to white except in the creases, and almost fell to pieces in her fingers. She laid them down tenderly and took out the tiny folded square of paper that had lain beneath them. It was unevenly browned and stained, but the little ring of baby's hair within it was still bright. She carefully refolded it and replaced it, the flowers above it, with the black enamel mourning ring which interested her least. Then she put the box to one side, and, bending between the candles, the pen in hand, she wrote slowly, in a cramped hand, inside the stained cover of the box, "Found by me, Jean Dimmock, in the little hair trunk in the attic of the parsonage, with Beena on April 28, 189—, when I was very sad." She blotted the writing carefully, put the cover on the box, tied the faded ribbon, blew out the candles, and felt her way back to bed. The green box lay under her pillow, in the clasp of her hand as she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was a natural result of the strained feeling of the days with Beena that, when the work was ended, when the old servant had departed and the house was closed pending the arrival of the new minister, Jean should have been troubled by a guilty sensation of relief. Conscious of it she huddled miserably in the depths of the great bed at night, telling herself fiercely that she would never, never forget. Assuring herself that every day made her sorrier — and that as long as she ever lived she would be just as miserable. With her eyes shut, and her hands clenched, she called up the images of her mother and father impartially, — afraid if she recalled her mother oftener her father would be hurt, — and with them before her inner sight cried that she was their very own little girl who could never be happy any more.

But no grief, however poignant or dutiful, could deaden her interest in life for long. And soon what she actually missed the most out of the old existence were not the lost presences, but, first, the curious musty, spicy, sweet smell of the parsonage kitchen which she had learnt at an early age to associate with things delectable and comforting, and next, the pleasant touch of her mother's hands upon her hair when it was combed and braided for the night.

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She went sniffing about after Martha for a time hoping to detect in her new home that happy smell which meant fresh crisp sugar cookies stuffed with golden bits of candied orange peel, yet also elusively suggested locust flowers and woodshed kittens. She finally lost the expectation in the equally insistent and individual smell of this old house which Martha pridefully explained by the oil of lavender and wintergreen berries which she added to her polishing waxes.

As for the hair-brushing, Martha mounted heavily to Jean's room at half-past eight every night and made a short business of it.

"No, it does not hurt, Miss Jean. The stiffer the brush, the harder the hand, the thicker the hair," she declared, counting the strokes "thirty-five — thirty-six."

"I don't want it any thicker."

"Be a proud cat and it will all come out! — forty-eight — forty-nine — fifty. There, you can git to bed alone for once. The doctor 'll be coming in wet."

The child looked up quickly, her sulkiness vanished. "Where has he gone? It 's raining so hard. Does he have to go, whether it pours or not?"

"He stay at home for rain! 'Course he has to go — what's to do if he does n't come? Who's to help, I should like to know. Don't be asking dumb questions. Go to bed. If you want to please the doctor you'll sleep and eat and grow fat."

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"Not fat!" the child protested. "I don't like fat people."

"Not much danger," Martha grumbled. "Look at you! Thin and small as a child of ten."

"Oh, I will eat and I will sleep," the child cried, colouring sensitively.

Under the sheet which she had drawn over her head till she could collect sufficient courage to face the shadows in the room, her cheeks burned. Did he think she was a hideous little thing? She would go to sleep at once and eat two bowls of oatmeal to-morrow morning for breakfast. She did hate oatmeal, especially when it happened to be lumpy. And the worst of it was you could never tell when it was going to be lumpy. She would take one plate on trial and if it was n't lumpy, then she should have another. Satisfied with this heroic promise of devotion, she went to sleep.

But it is the unexpected that makes cowards of most of us. The first plateful of porridge safely disposed of the next morning, it was a stodgy lump in the second plateful helped with approval by Miss Roxina, that proved poor Jean's undoing. It was a detestable lump, rather hard and rather raw. She knew that no power could make her swallow it. She did not dare to take it out of her mouth. She choked. John Erskine, reading his letters, made a slight, quite unconscious movement of annoyance. Miss Roxina looked at her severely.

"Swallow," she said, "swallow."

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Jean grew crimson, tears sprang to her eyes, and in an utter rout of mortification and rage, she desperately started from the table and fled from the dining-room.

“Naughty child,” Miss Roxina said vexedly, “she choked.”

“Evident and audible,” John answered, still reading. But when his letters were finished and laid aside, he looked up. “Had n’t you better ask Martha to call her back?”

Martha went in quest, but returned baffled.

“She’s nowhere that I can find. I’ve called her all over the house. Naughty young one. Sulks in the morning.”

“Let her alone. It was n’t sulks this time,” John said indulgently, rising.

Jean, having rushed from the house, disposed of the horrid morsel behind the currant bushes in the garden — and then faced the appalling fact that she could not possibly return to the dining-room. The more she thought of it, the more heinous her behaviour loomed in her eyes. She became a hot atom of self-conscious misery. She saw herself grotesque, ill-mannered, disgusting — and knew despair. Not only, she decided, could she not go back to breakfast, but never again could she face John Erskine. Oh, it was hard — it was unfair! She had only taken the second helping to please him! Crouching behind the bushes she heard Martha’s voice calling her through the open windows, but she kept still.

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She would not move until John Erskine had left. The sun of May was shining bright, the trees of the garden were filled with the twittering of nesting birds, the sheltering currant bushes were sweet with aromatic bloom, but it all only added to the tragedy of her resolve — to go away —

She heard the stable door roll open with a prolonged squeak and thud. She heard the horses stamping on the floor within and the man's voice speaking to them. Then she heard the bell from the house rung in the stable, and in another minute the sound of the carriage driving out and the quick trotting of the horses along the hard drive to the front door.

She rose up then and cautiously looked over the currant bush. In a moment she saw the carriage drive down the avenue and out of the gates. With its disappearance a sense of desolation stole over her. She wished that she had gone back before he left. She suddenly realised that, though she had fled from him, he would have understood. But go back now to Miss Roxina — to Martha — never. Angry at herself, she hated them both. Filled with a lawless desire to be quit of them, she ran out of the garden by the back gate. Lower Street was quiet — only three or four cottages faced on it — but if there had been a hundred, in her present mood, she would not have cared.

Hatless, she took her way under the fresh green of the maple trees, walking quickly along. The street,

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after passing the last cottage, turned itself into an easy, ambling country road, which bent away from the village to the left, crossed a bridge, and went on down the green valley on and on into the larger world beyond. An ideal way for the feet of adventure, yet — they paused at the bridge. Spring lay over the split-rail fence; it laughed all over the low marsh meadows. Jean heard it, and went over the fence after it — and the world was suddenly golden.

Marsh marigolds — the king's cups — grow in wet places, and when you gather them, they swell up and the long white stems and the cobwebby rootlets drip muddy water all over you — and it's altogether a damp and delightful business; absorbing, too, when you have n't goloshes or even boots and the wet comes into your shoes. But nobody cares for wet feet in May when the sun shines and all is new and glad and golden, least of all, Jean, lost to all but the enchantment. In all her country life she had never tasted the ecstasy of this freedom. Walks she had taken, even walks by field and wood, but a solitary ramble was an unthought-of, as it would have been an unpermitted, joy.

Grief and trouble slipped away. Clutching her armful of muddied golden wealth, she threw herself with ardour into the absorbing pursuit of following the stream. Every in and out she must follow, she promised herself. But the flowers jolted when she jumped, grew heavy on her arm, were fading. She had an inspiration — "They shall die upon the

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stream like the flowers on the river Ganges in the missionary books," she thought. She stood on a tussock and strewed them upon the waters, scattering them from the bank with light fingers, her eyes misty as she watched them float away. Then she saw that the sleeves of her white guimpe were wet and dirty. It was one of the new fine white guimpes that *his* sister had sent from Boston with the new straight black frocks. A great pang twinged through her conscience. She had spoiled the frock. Now she could never go back, even if she had wanted to. A lump rose in her throat. She stood still on the bank and looked about her. She had come a long way — she was tired and hungry. She must find the road again and go on. She could no longer see the bridge, it was hidden by the fringing willows and alders. But the other way, across the next meadow, was another bridge. She would walk on there and follow another road. She started, bravely determined. She saw nothing now of flower or tree, nor the dancing light on the water, nor the darting birds. She hurried on blindly, sore at the irony of life. When she had taken the porridge to please him! There was no use in trying to be good any more. And she had so wanted to be good! To get fat — not too fat — but round instead of skinny. She stumbled and a tear stole down her nose. She dashed it away with a savage hand.

Perhaps when she did not come back, they would be sorry for — she did not exactly know for what.

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Anyway, they would be sorry — and he would sometimes speak of the child who was gone. Flashing across this came the wonder where she should get any supper. She approached the bridge and climbed a stone wall to the road. There she stood for a moment, tempted. Over the bridge the road surely ran back to the village. Could she return? She looked down at her muddy feet, at the new black frock, stained and rent, at the grimy wrists of the new guimpe. And face Cousin Roxina — who had said “Swallow!” And Martha? Never. With a bursting heart, but high courage, she turned her back again on Tacitus.

CHAPTER IX

THE feet of adventure pressed the road again. And again the witchery of spring beguiled. "There's lots of things besides me that likes this day," Jean said to herself as she went steadily on. "Besides birds an' fishes an' beasts an' me. Mother said she did n't know if there were fairies — but I know. There are fairies. But it's not like just *fairies*. It's not just little men all dressed in green — it's not that at all. It's something that's just *in* it all." She nodded her head up and down and around — "In it all — in it all. Little men in green would jump an' spoil things — hopping an' skipping an' jumping. It's not like that — but it's there all the same — something that I *just* can't hear an' something that I *just* can't feel. By an' by, when we die, p'r'aps we can — oh, but I don't want to die — not forever an' ever an' ever. An' some people I don't b'lieve ever find it, even when they do die. Mother would, though, 'cause she was always looking an' she 'd help father." She paused — she was so deep in her thoughts that the road ran steadily by. "An' there's places where it's quite near — an' there's places where you think it's going to be near an' it's far away — an' places where you don't think anything about it — an' there it is! An' that's the funniest. You go walking along, an' then something grabs you all nice, an' you

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know it's that, an' you look an' you only see a flower — or you see the wood is n't just a wood — an' you wait an' think you'll know all about it *this* time — an' it's all gone."

She sighed and then went on talking eagerly to herself. "Marigolds don't look like that — not a bit. Blue flowers do — an' white flowers — an' mostly so at night. If I could get out into a garden when it's moonlight! But I can't —" She stopped with a little laugh. "You're a silly — you have n't got any sense at all. You just like to talk nonsense. An' what would people say if they knew what you said about silly things? I am glad they don't know an' they're never goin' to — Ouch!" She gave a little cry. A pebble in her shoe. It did hurt. She hopped to a stone at the roadside and sat down. She was not as warm as she had been, and now she realised that the bright day was clouding over and a chill breeze was stirring. Dismayed, she gazed at the sky. She had never thought of rain. Must not the feet of adventure always press a golden road?

It was unfair, like the lump in the porridge. Would spiteful, outside things like this always interfere? What should she do if it rained? The road stretched back such a very long way to the bridge. Not far ahead it was lost round a woody turn. If only there was a farmhouse round the bend, just out of sight, with a kind woman at the door, who would say, "Come in, little girl, an' rest an' have some —" She suspended the imaginary invitation to consider what

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she would most like to have — bread and milk? No — gingerbread — rather sticky and black. Her hungry mouth watered at the prospect. She jumped up and hurried on, intent upon food. In her mind the farm, the woman, the black molasses cake were certainties. She reached the turn. There was not a house in sight down the long road, but there, swinging towards her, was John Erskine.

A wild impulse to fly, to hide, seized her — but she knew that it was too late. He had seen her. Oh, to be discovered thus — wet and muddy and tired — on this lonely road. It was bitter. She called for aid from Heaven, but the hoped-for miracle was unworked and he was close. She stood in the middle of the road, wet and bedraggled but defiant, bracing herself to meet reproof, or, worse, amusement, in his face.

But she saw neither. Relief at the sight of her was uppermost in John Erskine's mind. He had hardly acknowledged to himself the desperate fears that had haunted his search for her. But here she was — safe. He felt as if an impending curse had been averted. Relief sent a lightness to his voice and smoothed the sternness from his face. Some intuition told him how he should deal with her.

"It's going to rain," he said in an odd voice, but quite as if he were talking to some grown-up casually met. "Have you had a good time? We can go back together."

"I'm not going back." She tried to fling the

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words firmly, but her voice wavered at some suspected suffering in his face.

He smiled. "I know," he said. "A road" — he motioned with his hand — "does lead a man on. It is often hard for me to turn back. But after having the fun of pretending for a bit, we all have to in the end."

"Do you?" She eyed him, frowning with interest. "Certain."

"But *I* won't." Her lip was trembling.

"Of course, not until you *feel* that you must. I don't want you to. But I must go. It's four o'clock and I have still some work to do. By the way" — he was fumbling in his pocket — "you would n't like a sandwich?" He produced a small square packet. "Take them with you." He was looking down on her gravely, his blue eyes reading her.

She shook her head.

"No? Well," he put them back in his coat, "I'll tell them at the house that I've seen you. They were rather worried about you at lunch. Cousin Roxina cried, and Martha was cross. I told them that it was the spring, that you'd gone for a fling, and that you'd turn up all right. Don't be too late, that's all." He nodded and walked on.

Jean took two steps in the other direction, then suddenly all the hardness in her melted, for Miss Roxina had cried, silly though she was. It appealed to the child's generosity. She stopped, paused for a second, then turned and flew down the road after the fast retreating figure.

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"Dr. Erskine — Dr. Erskine," she panted.

He swung round.

"Hullo!" he said, "you're coming? You're right, I think."

She stopped short before him. "It's for them," she explained. "If she cried."

"Quite so," he smiled. "Give me your hand. We shall get along faster."

He was very thankful to have her thin little paw in his. When he had set forth to search for her some subconscious, illogical return to inherited teachings had whispered that if anything had happened to her, it was a punishment, a visitation, the finger of God.

But nothing had happened, and, equally illogically, he now felt disposed to consider her return in safety as a proof of especial divine benediction. Detecting this feeling in himself, his mind expressed incredulous surprise at such weakness, but the feeling shamefacedly remained. Since he had taken her as a duty, surely such powers as there were would give him the chance of fulfilling that duty well?

He looked down at her — with a shock of surprise he noted how slim and well-made she was. She walked, keeping good pace with him, her head up, her eyes on the road ahead. What a shy, charming little face — sensitive, wholly interesting. What was she thinking of?

"Tell me about it," he said suddenly.

She started, looking up.

"What?"

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"Was it really the sun, spring in the air, the road — or was it something else?" His smile changed his whole face. She hesitated, and before she could answer he went on quickly, "No, don't tell me, Jean — I have no right to ask you. I believe in freedom — in yours as well as in mine."

"Do you?" Her tone was uncertain. The change in his voice from gaiety to sudden gravity puzzled her.

"No one," he went on, "not any one of us has the right to call another to account. We must all act at times as we think right — in defiance of everything —" he paused,

"Must we?"

"Yes," he recalled himself and looked at her; "don't you agree?"

She shook her head wisely. "No, I don't think so. It is what I did to-day. But I only liked it for a little while in the meadow, and then I got wet" — her voice quivered — "and awfully muddy — and I'm afraid my new dress is spoiled." She ended very low.

"Oh, we have to pay. The question is, was the time in the meadow worth it?"

She thought a minute. "Yes," she said uncertainly. "Yes, I think it was — but I won't do it again."

He threw back his head with a boyish laugh.

"Splendid," he said, — "magnificent. We'll say no more about it. But suppose we sit on this stone

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for a moment and share the sandwiches and wait for the carriage. I told them to send it to meet me."

Jean looked at him keenly, but his face betrayed nothing, so she gave her attention to the food.

"Good?" he asked, watching her. "You were hungry?"

She nodded, brushed away the last crumb, and raised a stained but radiant face.

"It's fun," she said decidedly. "And it can rain all it likes now that the carriage is coming. And" — she leaned towards him, yet speaking with a certain reserve — "I don't mind telling you now. It was n't the spring — or anything — well — it was that lump in the oatmeal!" Her face grew fierce. "It was n't fair. I wanted to be good and get fat and eat two plates — for you — and the lump came when I did n't expect it, and Miss Roxina said, 'swallow,' and I was mad that I could n't and I nearly choked, and I was ashamed — and then I could n't bear it and I ran away." Her eyes were raised to him, appealing, defiant.

"Poor child," he said gravely, "poor child. It's what we all do. But, at least," he ended, rising, "you have had the courage to confess. Come. The carriage is late. We had better walk on."

CHAPTER X

OWEN OWENS, the preacher, lived over the bridge in the last house, a small brown wren of a house, set in Maytime in a nest of blossoms. For Owens was a gardener as well as preacher and watchmaker and scientist and botanist and poet-lover and child-lover and cook and scullion, and a great many other apparently incompatible things.

He could preach a well-reasoned, dogmatic sermon which would satisfy his orthodox hearers on every head, yet go home to pop his own dinner in the oven.

With his knotty fingers he could adjust and manipulate delicate wheels and springs and bits of intricate mechanism, holding them at the end of his nose, under his short-sighted eyes, and the same fingers could coax any seedling into growth, could charm any green thing to flourishing.

He could sweep and clean and scour his pots and pans till they shone second to none in Tacitus, and as readily mount to the roof there to point the great revolving telescope, which he had himself installed, to an accompanying murmur of verses from his favourite poet.

And then, leaving science and literature aloft, he could descend, to play with some child in his workshop or garden.

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The chance visitor to Tacitus found the preacher surprising, interesting, remarkable; but the village had accepted him and his ways half a century before, and hardly gave him a thought except when they wished to avail themselves of his skill or his wisdom.

Now, while the May wind sifted petals past his open window, disturbing him with its call to the garden, the preacher sat humped over his work-table with a microscope in his eye fixed upon the wheels and cogs, the delicately chased vitals of an old French timepiece.

"A fine bit o' work — a hundred years old — a hundred year — this bit o' mechanism and good to go yet apiece — a hundred year — and poor Dimmock thirty-five — to whom the grave is now a bed — 'thout day or night, nor warmth, nor the spring light." He nodded his big head. "What a lesson, my brethren — 'in the midst of life, we are in death' and —" His soliloquy was interrupted by a knock, the opening of the door, and the appearance of young Rufus Haines.

"Hullo!" said the young man. He looked as usual neat and gay, self-satisfied and smiling.

The preacher raised a hand without turning his head, his lips pursed, waited for several moments, then carefully taking out his microscope laid it down.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, looking up. "I did n't hear your knock. I was busy," he motioned to the watch —

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“but now I see with eye serene,
The very pulse of the machine.

—What can I do for you?”

“Oh, thanks,” Haines explained, feeling somewhat cheap. “It was only that you’re a sort of a bookworm, so I thought you could tell me. What does ‘Sesame’ mean?”

Owen Owens shook his head. “That’s not in Wordsworth nor any of the school —”

“It’s not poetry,” Rufus explained. “It’s a book I’ve been given to read, called —” he inspected the back — ‘Sesame and Lilies.’ I can’t make anything of it.”

Owen Owens, searching now up and down the table amid a litter of lenses, dislocated clock-works, dried seeds, and tools for something vital to the moment, shook his head. “Don’t know. Can’t she tell you what it means?”

“Who?”

The old man peered at the fairy spiral in his hand.

“Why, *you* know —

The creature not too bright and good
For human nature’s daily food.”

“Oh, stow it, Mr. Owens —”

But the old man continued to quote slowly: —

“For transient sorrow, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses —”

The door slammed after the young fellow and cut

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short the couplet, but the preacher finished to himself "tears and smiles," nodded upon the words with a sigh which ended in a chuckle. "Walked in without knocking," he said.

The rosy petals continued to float down upon the May breeze and to whiten the path and the strip of green before the little brown house, but the preacher did not leave his work till one, borne by a vagrant breath, was wafted in through the window and settled upon his table. There it lay like a tiny fairy shallop, delicately balanced upon the shining mirror of the worn table-top. The old man gazed upon it, charmed. Then he touched it with a blackened finger, and finally rose, took off his apron, and, lifting the petal to the palm of his hand, carried it to the window and set it adrift again to finish its gentle journeying.

"You're at home." It was John Erskine's voice. The words were spoken in a tone of indecision and surprise as if he were saying to himself, "Well, you see, he's there, after all—now, what are you going to do?" He stood outside the brown gate for an instant and then continued, —

"May I come in?"

"Cer-r-tainly, John." The old man spoke with a pleased yet sturdy alacrity, as if in his gladness at seeing the man he disclaimed any pride in his visitor's position. He hurried to open the front door, in the little entry. He was a trifle flurried. It was long since John Erskine had found time to call on him;

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in the past few years he had found his relations with the doctor's household reduced to a kindly exchange of plants and advice with Martha and Miss Roxina. Yet he had borne no grudge, felt no resentment. John Erskine was young, was absorbed in the cares of a large and growing practice, and had friends for his leisure in the Dimmock household.

To-day the preacher thought humbly that possibly his turn had come. He paused.

"Shall we go into the garden — John?"

John Erskine looked as if he did not hear. "Ah — as you like." Then, as the old man turned to the door, he added — "If you don't mind, — no —"

The preacher's short-sighted eyes scanned the younger man's face. "You're tired, John. We'll just come up to the roof. But there's a tulip — ah" — he nodded — "if Peter Bell had seen that tulip it would have meant something more to him than a simple tulip! It's a wonder." The thick burr was emphasised now as it always was in speech with those he loved.

John Erskine, following up the stairs to the home-made observatory, recognised the change, remembered it of old, was soothed and wounded. He followed the quaint figure into the bare room where he had come daily through many holidays to prepare the necessary work for further examinations. The difference between those days and the present smote with such pain that he stood still, his face wrung. The preacher fussed at the window, talking.

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"When a man is tired, his eyes want peace — large peace — gr-r-eat spaces. Her-re you have the sky and the tree-tops."

There was no answer. The younger man was battling with a great and mounting surge of bitterness, of despair which whispered, "Chuck it all and go away."

The preacher turned. John Erskine stood gazing at him in a kind of tense, dumb misery, his forehead contracted, his mouth tight shut as if to hold his self-control, yet his head steadily high. Owen Owens's sympathy, pierced by a gleam of kindly humour, recognised the boy he had known; the boy whose high spirits and quick impulses had led him headlong into places where his better judgement stood aghast, retreat forbidden by a pride which could not bend to defeat in any circumstance. "Thrash it out of him," the old doctor had growled. But in his heart the father had proudly known the assurance that such pride as the culprit John's could not be reached by any lash; it was impregnable, deep-rooted in the very fibre of the boy's nature.

Now, as in those earlier days, the preacher realised that whatever the trouble — plainly marked in his face — which had brought John Erskine to him to-day, his pride would bar its utterance; that, even though the man had come with the intention of seeking some counsel or comfort, he would leave again uncounselled and uncomforted.

"Sit down, John," he said gravely.

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John Erskine, with a slight straightening of his shoulders, took his old seat beside the bare, ink-marked table. "I am not quite myself," he explained coldly. "Tired — need a change — Ought to get away — and can't." He faced the older man with an odd challenge in his face.

The preacher nodded. Yes. So the boy had feuded all approach to confidence. Yet in the man's half-mocking regard he read an underlying, deadly weariness that troubled him. He had loved the boy, been proud of his success, prouder still of the sense of duty which had brought him back to Tacitus. But now a doubt crossed his mind. Did John regret his choice? Did he feel the restrictions of this village life, the limitations he had set to his own ambitions? Would it have been better for him to have stayed away there in foreign lands, where they discover great secrets in state laboratories which are thence given to the whole world? Would that possibly have been better for him than this daily spending of himself in a small round for others? Yet, surely, his work in the last six years —

John's voice broke in upon his troubled thoughts.

"I came in partly to ask you, sir, if you remember Rev. Charles Savage who visited us once when I was a boy. They have left the choice of Dimmock's successor practically to me. That is, we're a committee of three — Sam Beebe, young Haines, and myself — but unfortunately that means me." John Erskine paused. His voice was weary again. "It

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is n't a job that I like — that goes without saying. But I've got to do it. My sister — Marian — has written to say that Mr. Savage would like the place, that you would remember him. Do you?"

The old man nodded gravely. "I remember. A gr-r-eat scholar — speaking Gr-r-eek as I speak English. A kind man, a gentleman. Your father invited me to sup with him. But he's an old man now, John."

"Over fifty — with one daughter. And you liked him, sir. So that settles it. Though he cannot come before the fall."

"Settle it!" the preacher cried in a scandalised voice. "Settle it! Surely ye don't settle a meenister on a people like that, John. Look here. You've had a great strain, but don't let it break your responsibility."

"Strain!" John Erskine repeated sharply.

"The taking of your two friends — 'tis not every man could have stood the shock as well as you have, John. So the whole village has said — and you must n't break down now. Remember how ye came back here because your duty lay first here in Tacitus where your father lived and where the people need ye — that's why ye came back. And what have ye done since ye came?" He leaned forward, his cream-cheese face earnest, his lank black hair falling over his high brow, his thick voice vehement. "Ye've done all to make your friends proud of ye — proud. Six years since ye came back and each year ye've risen in the respect and affection of this village and

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of the township. I knew your father, John. If the old doctor were alive, he would say what I say to you now, that you've done well. You've been a good and faithful servant — and you've got to keep it up."

John Erskine did not move. He had longed to-day to hear the plea of his own works urged to himself by the lips of another. But now that it was done and by this old and loyal friend, he felt no inrush of encouragement — No one could help him — no one. For no one knew what he had lost.

"You're tired out," the preacher went on. "It's been a cruel thing. Take a holiday. Go along and see Miss Marian and the new meenister himself in Boston."

John Erskine rose, shaking his head.

"Can't be done. Thank you for your good opinion — which I don't deserve. I wish I could feel that it does — count —"

"Count? No one — could do — what you have done here," the other declared, spacing his words with emphasis. "Look at the people roundabout. What would a stranger make of them? But all, Welsh and Methody and Unitarian and the 'Piscopalian over to the Falls — they all look to you — as they looked to your father — I can't say more'n that, 'n' you've topped all the rest by this bit of kindness to the child."

John Erskine rose brusquely. "I must be going. But first show me that tulip that would move even Peter Bell to an inkling of higher things."

CHAPTER XI

As long as the parsonage remained untenanted, Jean played a play. It was simple; that Robert and Mary Dimmock still lived with their little girl Jean across the road. Of course this also involved the play that she, herself, was not Jean Dimmock, but some one else. So she naturally became the little girl who had always belonged in the old Erskine house, and who took a great interest in the child who lived in the parsonage.

All through the summer she played this, devising each day some new excuse why she could not go to see Jean Dimmock nor Jean Dimmock come to see her. "If Jean Dimmock knew that I was so lonesome," she would say, "she'd ask her mother to let her come. Jean Dimmock is n't lonesome; she's got her father and mother. She's got a little garden, too, back of the house, and she's out there now, and her mother is there sitting by her in a little chair, sewing a long seam with her white hands and talking softly with her nice voice. Jean Dimmock is just as happy! Her mother tells her lovely things Mr. Dimmock's up in his study and that funny old Beena is making cookies in the kitchen. Jean can smell 'em in the garden, and she says, 'Mother! Cookies!' And her mother laughs and says, 'Run; then!' Oh, I wish I had some!"

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With September came a check to this play. One day Miss Roxina and Jean went for a walk to the Falls. It was a great expedition, for the Falls were at least a mile and a half out of the village. It necessitated some preparation. They carried little cakes in a little basket, a sunshade, an Eastern shawl of many-hued stripes for Miss Roxina to sit upon, and a small fat volume of Scott's poems, for Miss Roxina was reading aloud "Marmion" for the improvement of Jean's mind and thought this an opportunity not to be missed. It was a pleasant party on the whole, though Miss Roxina did walk very slowly, and was always afraid that you'd get wet or hurt or hot or cold. Still, Jean found delight in the day, in the roadside, the wood, and most of all in the stream, where the water slipped in smooth sheets over grey and yellow limestone.

That was why this especial place was so amusing. It was no ordinary pebbly, rocky, sandy stream. It had a visible history. It had plainly cut its way through the soft limestone of the little gorge, now hung with blue harebells, ferns, and grasses, and went slipping down the hill over steps of limestone which would, in their turn, be worn away. It was very fascinating, and while Miss Roxina read Marmion's last charge in a quaveringly moved and valiant voice, Jean watched the water and thought about it.

Then, on their way home, she saw that the windows of the parsonage were open! Although she

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pretended not to see, hurrying Miss Roxina along, though she told herself that Mr. and Mrs. Dimmock and Jean had gone away for the day, and that Beena was house-cleaning, she knew what it meant, and did not need to be told that the new minister was coming. He did not, however, actually arrive until nearly Christmas — until Tacitus was under deep snow.

"It does seem a pity Miss Savage should have come in such a cold spell," Miss Roxina said, as, seated at the old secretary in the upstairs sitting-room, she carefully set a copy for Jean's writing-lesson.

Jean did not answer. She stood at the window, gazing out through the frosted tracery of the pane. From henceforth she was to be Jean Dimmock and no one else, she told herself. As for these new people who had come shouldering out her own, they were nothing to her. Yet, as she said it, with her chin in the air, she knew, by the hurt at the bottom of her heart, that she was sickly jealous of them — not for herself, but for those others — she hated them.

"Any one who ain't used to the country'll feel the cold in Tacitus," Miss Roxina went on.

Still the child was silent.

"Cousin John has not said much, but 'pears to me, he must be glad to have them here. Miss Savage is an old friend of his sister Marian — Mrs. Winthrop —"

"Yes — I know," Jean burst out recklessly, "and

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she speaks Greek and Hebrew and plays the piano and works for the poor and I think she's a horrid old thing!"

"Jean Dimmock!" Miss Roxina looked properly shocked. "Come here — what would Cousin John say if he knew!"

Jean's face, flushed and mutinous, changed swiftly. "You won't tell him," she asked, her back to the window, "Cousin Roxina."

"Not if you're sorry."

The child hesitated. "I'm sorry."

"Well, then, sit down."

Jean took her place at the table. "That's the way they make you lie," she thought. "I am not sorry a bit, but she made me say that I am. I'd say I was sorry again, too, rather than have him know." As she bent over the copy reading, "Consistency, thou art a jewel," John Erskine was mounting the steps of the parsonage.

He was ushered into the room he had once known so well. It was a relief to find it unrecognisable. Its furnishing was green and white, and in its sanity seemed a fit setting for the woman who rose to greet him. Constance Savage gave an instant impression of balance and repose. Heart-whole at twenty-nine, she presented that combination of idealism with eminently practical qualities which is not unusual in New England. In big things compromises were not for her. It would always be the best or none. Meanwhile she did all the small things carefully and well.

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With the recognition of a common world, common traditions, and a common ground of meeting, they shook hands.

"How very nice of you, Dr. Erskine. Marian said that you would be waiting to welcome us. My father will be down at once. He has taken the little room upstairs as his study. Don't you think we look settled? I always feel installed when I have my piano, my books, and my friends." She glanced at the many photographs.

He smiled. "You put the friends last."

"No, only the piano first —"

They spoke of Boston, of Marian Gray, of common acquaintances. John noted the light-brown hair wound in smooth waves round her head, her clear brown eyes, her strong white hands which lay folded so quietly in her lap. And yet, as she leaned forward talking to him from the corner where Mary had used to sit, he was seized by an impression of unreality, wondering for a second why she was there. Gazing at her, he saw, not hers but another face.

The instant's aberration, the disconnection, so to speak, of their two minds, was felt by her. She looked up. Before she could realise the expression on his face the opening door broke the spell. Mr. Savage entered. A tall, thin man, with sparse grey hair, a high forehead, peaked light eyebrows, pale-blue eyes which seemed always looking expectantly over his thin, hooked nose, a wide, thin-lipped

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mouth, and a thin grey chin beard. He had the childlike look of the student.

He met the doctor with a kind of mild excitement. The three took their seats around the open wood-fire and the talk naturally turned upon Tacitus.

"Do tell us a little about the people," Constance begged. "I already love the village or what I have seen of it."

John Erskine's face brightened to an enthusiasm.

"I suppose it would seem a curious place to most people," he said. "That is why I was so anxious to get you here, sir," — he turned to the clergyman. "No one but a gentleman and one with a certain amount of imagination could understand Tacitus. I am not sure that I do, although I was born here. They are a serious, quiet people, to whom life is a grave matter. They have never heard of a duty of happiness: would n't understand it if they had. But they know right from wrong, as none of our modern hair-splitters ever can. And they are prepared to follow the right at any cost. In short, sir, as I think I wrote to you, they are rigid in principle, strict in practice, narrow in outlook, joyless, yet possessing a depth of serenity which, perhaps, is better than joy. They are inarticulate, yet ponder much. They are —"

Constance interrupted softly — "Puritans."

John met her glance gravely. "Yes, at the bottom Puritans still. That is the predominant characteristic of the farm and of the village. Besides that,

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you have a small body of Welsh who settled in the outlying country a generation ago. They have kept their language, their own point of view, and customs. They have their own church, the small white one you see as you drive into the village from the station. Their minister, Owen Owens, is one of the characters of the place, self-educated, simple, kind, and shrewd. You'll like him. He will help you with your garden, Miss Savage, for though the village limits any intimacy between the Methodists and ourselves, the Welsh preacher is *persona grata* everywhere.

"Of course other and more modern types have crept in. There's Rufus Haines, the schoolmaster, an up-to-date, slangy young chap. The Beebes, too, who have the store, might stand for the spirit of modern commercialism, though they and their success are more despised than admired by all except a small following. They really belong with the Methodists. The Methodist minister, Bowles by name, is a good, zealous, commonplace man, by the way. But, as the best, in the sense of the most prosperous as well as the most austere, portion of the community are Unitarians, the Beebes have come to us."

"How amusing." Constance looked thoughtful. "Even here."

"Quite so," John repeated: "even here. But you'll soon find all our oddities for yourself. Old Mrs. Lovejoy, who dresses like a man and nurses all the stray animals — she sells honey and fowls, by

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the way. And Spiller, who is Jack-of-all-trades when he is n't the undertaker. Then there's Skimmilk Smith, and my lean assistant Tanner, and many more." He stopped. "I can't expect any one," he went on, "to understand them as I do, or have the same affection for them. I suppose, in spite of everything acquired, I am really akin to them in that likeness which the same soil and air bestow in the course of several generations." He stopped. Then, looking up with a smile — "They have their faults, of course. But, as you see, I care a great deal for them. They are my people."

He changed the subject, but as he went out of the room to visit her father's study, Constance said to herself, "It was because he felt like that that he came back to them. How stupid people are. Every one wondered why he did it."

It was not till John was going, on his return to the sitting-room, that he came to one of the objects of his visit.

"My sister tells me that you are musical, Miss Savage, and added in her letter that possibly you might be persuaded to undertake the teaching of my little ward, Jean Dimmock. She has had no lessons yet, but I believe she has talent. I am anxious to interest her in something —" He paused.

"I know," she said in a low voice, "poor child. Marian told me. Of course I should love to teach her."

He hesitated. "She is an odd child. Not easy to

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know or to manage. Self-contained with strangers, yet very sensitive. Her ancestry may account for much of the curious contradiction in her. She's Spanish, you know, on one side, New England for the rest."

"A combination which might result in interesting surprises!" Miss Savage agreed, smiling. "You make me want to know her. I hope that we shall be friends."

"Good," the doctor said sincerely. He started to go, then turned. "There is one thing," he began. Miss Savage looked up. He cleared his throat. "You know the tragedy?"

She nodded, with a slight gesture of repugnance.

He looked down. "I do not want her to know." He paused; then, looking up, went on. "It's bad enough for her to lose both parents, but I don't want the horror of imagination added."

"I quite understand," Miss Savage said gravely. "Good-night. Thank you for coming. We know that you are busy, but we shall hope to see you whenever you can spare the time."

"Thank you. Ah, here is your father with the book he is good enough to loan me. Good-night, Miss Savage. Good-night, sir, good-night."

"A very exceptional man, my dear," the clergyman said when John had gone. "A scholar. He took a great interest in my paper 'On the Origin and Character of the Greek Tragedy' and made one very valuable suggestion. A clever man. It will add

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greatly to my pleasure having him for my neighbour. A man of character, if we may judge from a countenance."

"He was always supposed to be brilliant, you know, father. Don't you remember hearing of him? He took all kinds of honours."

"I do, I do. But in these days, when praise is, in my opinion, over-lavishly bestowed, I am pleasantly surprised to meet a man with such gifts as Dr. Erskine. As Orestes says, 'Pray that fair end may fair beginning follow' to this friendship." The clergyman turned, and with endeavour to hide his haste, went towards the door, his mind already in the room above.

Constance, still standing, looked after him.

"Are n't you going to stay with me a little while, father? You ate no lunch, you were so impatient to return to work. I will have a cup of tea for you in a minute if you will stop."

He turned back, visibly embarrassed between the choice of appearing ungracious or giving up the hour of daylight that remained.

His daughter had pity on the look of helpless appeal in his eyes. "No, don't stop. I see you have something important in your mind which must be said at once. Go, dear. Tea shall be ready when you come down."

"Thank you, Constance, thank you. That will be best. The doctor's suggestion —" The rest of the sentence was lost as he left the room.

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She smiled. With all his learning he was such a child. So kind and gentle; his only battles waged with far-distant scholars over the reading of some obscure Greek text. These contests alone brought fire to his mild eyes.

She walked to the piano. She was glad that he liked John Erskine. She had expected, herself, to like him. Everything that she had heard of him had interested her — his quixotic return to Tacitus more than his foreign laurels — his taking of the tragically orphaned child most of all. She opened her piano and began to play. Her firm hands touched the keys quietly yet surely. She sat straight, her head up, her eyes raised. She played Beethoven.

Suddenly she stopped. Now that she had seen him she wondered — what was the meaning of that strange and fleeting look that she had surprised upon his face? She had not been prepared, either, for the settled look of strain that she had found there. Perhaps he was overworked. She would see. Anyway, as her father had said, his being there would make a great difference to them. Yet, when she came to think of it, it was the other way around. It was that they might make a difference to him that they were there.

She pushed back her sleeves and went on playing.

CHAPTER XII

JOHN was the first to scent the spring. April, April with its memories was here again. The first soft breath that greeted him through his open window appalled him with its recall of tragedy and pain. Thank God it was a year behind him. Time would bury all griefs, all losses. Had not life resumed its ordinary way? Days filled with the fatiguing round of a wide country practice, nights devoted to work? Existence had become bearable again till this breeze had stirred something to waking. Could he never forget?

He went down to breakfast and there announced his discovery.

"Spring, Jean, — did n't your nose tell you?" He helped himself to toast. Why did the child stare so? She had eyes like her mother. "Your days of tyranny are numbered, Cousin Roxina."

Miss Roxina, faintly pink, fluttered behind the coffee tray. John liked to tease. It was not wise before the child. He was beginning again, talking some nonsense.

"It's time for Jean to fold up her sewing and go fishing. That's the part of her education that I undertake. You've worked her hard this winter, Cousin Roxina, confess it." He had begun to talk mechanically, but the child was so amused that he went on.

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The old lady demurred. "John Erskine, how you do talk!"

"Talk! I've kept silent hitherto because I am afraid of you! You know I'm afraid of you, don't you?"

"John!"

"You know, Jean and I are afraid of you. You know how you browbeat us, make us wipe our boots on the mat, and eat up our crusts, and say 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am.' It was only yesterday Jean showed me a disgraceful block of patchwork."

"Disgraceful! John!"

"Disgracefully big, I mean."

"Not only patchwork," chimed in Jean, "but crochet and knitting and mending and darning."

"Shocking! What have you to say, Cousin Roxina?"

The little lady stiffened. "Only this. When I was in Boston, at your sister's house, I saw the way your nieces are trained. Masters and mistresses coming and going, singing and playing and all the accomplishments. I am doing my best for Jean, though she has not been as diligent as I could wish."

Jean stared guiltily at her plate.

"Nonsense, Cousin Roxina." John's voice was a trifle sharp. "The child has done very well. Anyway, you are not to be found fault with on the first day of spring, are you, Jean? No lessons to-day! You shall learn poetry instead."

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"Oh, which?" — she was all eagerness. "May I choose?"

He laughed boyishly. "Well, which?"

She paused, debating. "Oh, I know. 'On the something by the cliffside lie strewn the white flocks' — you know. It's just the one for spring."

He pushed back his chair, his face sombre. "For the spring in Tacitus?" His tone was both weary and sarcastic.

The child, quick to catch a mood, ended quietly. "Something else, then. You choose, please."

"No, that's very good. But I read it to you weeks ago."

She nodded. "I know. But I liked it and the things you said. Sicily, the olive orchards, all grey. So I remembered."

Cousin Roxina sighed audibly. They were often talking about things which she did not understand, in a kind of shorthand speech which she was at much pains to follow. The sigh was partly one of disapproval, too; for poetry, other than that of sacred hymns, she vaguely felt to be profane. She believed it part of her duty to counteract John's taste in literature.

Now she rose primly and spoke in her precise little voice. "You must allow me, Cousin John, to choose Jean's verses to-day. She will finish her tasks with me this morning, and if it is your intention to go fishing this afternoon, for I see your rods are in the hall, she shall be ready. I see no reason why she should not accompany you."

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"My dear good cousin, I should think not." His tone was seriously decisive. "I shall do both my rounds before I come back, so I shall not be here for lunch." He walked to the door, but turned there. "At four at the dispensary, Jeanie." He would not by a look encourage the imp of mischief shining in Jean's eyes. The door closed after him.

Jean sighed.

"You must overcome that habit, Jean. It is not polite to sigh in company."

"Why not, Cousin Roxina?"

"Because it expresses fatigue or — or —"

"I think it *generally* means that we want to be where we are not, or doing something that we are not, and it is not rude to say that to you, is it?" Her face wore an expression of innocence.

Miss Adams relented.

"Perhaps not to me, indeed. But never in company. Now you will go up to your bedchamber and make your bed and put your things away neatly. Then join me in the sitting-room."

"Thank you, Cousin Roxina. May I just peep out of doors first to see if the spring *is* here?"

"Well, just for a minute, then." Miss Roxina trotted off with her fussy little air of importance to interview Martha, and Jean, making the most of her permission, opened the front door, ran across the stone verandah floor, and down the steps. Clear of the Doric columns, under the blue sky, she stopped, threw up her small head, sniffed the spring-

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laden air, then kicked up her long legs like a colt, and bolted round the house. She loved to run.

Cousin Roxina and Martha, discussing the day's fare in the kitchen, paused as they saw her flash by the door.

"Miss Jean," Martha said. "The spring it be, Miss Roxina."

"That's hardly an excuse, Martha. Miss Jean is inclined to be rather hoydenish at times."

"Well, miss, speaking for myself, with no disrespect, I'd rather see her so than quiet and studyin' all the day. Is n't it natural for young things?"

"Quite true, Martha. But a little more repose."

The figure dashed by the door again, head up, running swiftly, and, catching sight of Martha who had peered out at her, panted back as she ran, "Five times round is half a mile. Time me, Martha. Time me!"

Martha, wiping her hands on the roller, glanced with guilty interest at the clock. Miss Roxina, with a faint gasp, left the kitchen, and by a rapid advance through the hall, cut Jean off at the front of the house, stopped her in the second lap, and ordered her summarily within.

She stood panting and protesting. "You might have let me finish, Cousin Roxina."

"My dear, what will people think? In your teens — a great girl like you!"

"Oh, bother! There is no one to think except old Mr. Savage. And he can't see across here. I don't care

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what any one thinks really. It was fun, Cousin Rox!"

"Kindly do not shorten my name. Now, who is this?"

It was a figure approaching down the drive. A boy of sixteen, in ragged clothes, with a dull, pale face, set in a frame of light, lank hair, crowned by a battered old hat.

"Well, George Bullock, what do you want?" Miss Roxina's voice was unsympathetic. The shiftlessness of the Bullock family on the dunes was a sore subject with her.

The boy stood speechless, looking from the child to the little lady standing above on the steps. They waited.

"Pants!" he mumbled finally, hanging his head.

Miss Roxina's maidenly eyes inspected his nether garments. "I should think so. Jean, you will go to Martha and ask for that pair of the doctor's trousers which she put by yesterday."

Jean, quite filled with pity for the boy's poverty, ran into the house and came back in a moment with the garment.

"They're much too long for him, Martha says, Cousin Roxina."

Cousin Roxina held them up and measured them and the boy with her eye.

"Much. Now, George Bullock, listen to me. You take these home to your mother and tell her they are as good as new. That I say she must cut them off two inches at the bottom and turn them up and

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sew them. They will last you a long time. You understand?"

The boy nodded, took them sheepishly and slouched away.

"Now go up to your room, Jean, and be careful how you leave your writing-table. It was most untidy yesterday."

Quite unchastened, Jean ran up the stairs, her body still tingling from the exercise. Half an hour later she presented herself before Miss Roxina in her sitting-room. The day promised to be long till four o'clock. She set herself with no good grace to the tasks appointed. The doctor had said that she need do no lessons, yet there seemed a great deal to get through. Sustained by the prospect of the afternoon's pleasure, however, she finished it all, even the learning of the verses. Such verses! Unearthed by Miss Roxina from the treasure-house of memory and recited with moist eyes, they met a worthy reception from Jean. She learned them with secretly gleeful gusto.

At three o'clock, in the midst of her practising, she stopped short. It was raining. Of all unmerited disappointments.

Cousin Roxina who was counting aloud — one — two — three — four — one — two — three — four — looked up from her knitting enquiringly.

"It's raining," Jean explained.

"One — two — three — four," Cousin Roxina frowned, nodded, and proceeded inexorably.

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But the fingers remained glued to the keys.

“You know Miss Savage won’t like it if you don’t know your lesson to-morrow!”

“I don’t care!”

“Jean! And you said you liked that piece.”

“Oh, the music — yes, I do like it,” she pouted.

“That’s different.”

“One — two — three — four.” The old lady counted steadily, and the fingers fell into time and the practising continued until four o’clock chimed from the little clock. Then, with a sudden dash, the child leapt from the piano and flew from the room and down the stairs.

“She did n’t have time to say that I could n’t,” she panted as she seized her hat and coat in the hall and ran out of the house.

CHAPTER XIII

THE rain was nearly over as Jean ran down the path to the small grey building called the "Office." She burst in at the door, startling the assistant, a sandy young man, known to her as "Mr. Tanner," who was doing up a prescription. She sniffed the drug-laden air with satisfaction and stood for a moment eyeing the tiers of gold-lettered glass and china jars which filled the shelves. The dispensary was a very fascinating spot. Such nice, candy-looking stuff in some of the jars, and in others compounds of wonderful colours; sticks in some and lumps in some and liquid in many; nice little measures and scales, too, and bowls and flasks and bottles. A truly delectable place, if only the sandy-haired one was not always in possession.

"The doctor is in his office," Mr. Tanner vouchsafed.

"Oh!" Jean knocked at the door.

"Come in." The voice was preoccupied.

John Erskine sat at his desk, his back to the book-lined room, bending over a tin box on the table before him. He hardly noticed Jean's approach. She understood and her eyes sparkled.

"We're going?"

He nodded, a piece of gut between his teeth.

She craned nearer. "What a lot of flies!"

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He put away the piece of gut. "Yes, coachman — yellow Sally — alder — dun — cocky — bond-dhu" — he touched them as he named them — "all the caboodlum. Come on." He snapped the box shut. "Rain's stopped. You are ready?"

"When I have said my poetry. Cousin R. says I must before I can go. It's such a beauty. You really must hear it."

He glanced at her quickly. He had had some experience of Cousin Roxina's choice in these matters. But his voice was grave and his face severe as he said: —

"You must do as Cousin Roxina says, of course. But be quick. We must not lose the rise."

"There are six verses." She cleared her throat in approved country fashion, and standing before him with downcast eyes began, in a voice which was a good imitation of Miss Adams's: —

"Mamma, how still the baby lies,
I cannot hear its breath.
I cannot see its laughing eyes —
Pray, tell me, is it —"

A knock on the door luckily saved John the necessity of interruption. It was Mr. Tanner who appeared on the threshold to ask if his services might be dispensed with at an early hour, to enable him to attend choir practice. John gave him permission, and, ignoring the unfinished recitation, haled Jean forth.

The last misty drops of the shower were falling as

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they left the office together by the door which opened directly upon Lower Street. They turned to the right and walked along to the road that runs over the bridge; there the houses of the village ended, and they climbed a wall and struck across the field. As they neared the fringe of willows along the creek, the doctor stopped abruptly, with a motion to Jean for silence. She tiptoed to his side and looked where he pointed through the bushes.

Her visitor of the morning stood on the bank angling with a string and a hickory pole. His old felt hat was on the back of his head, his long pale hair hung lank.

"George Bullock," the doctor said. "Catching anything, George?"

The boy started. "Yes'm, I mean mister, I mean doctor." He pointed under the willows where a nice mess of fish lay on the short green turf. He giggled. "Reckon I *kin* fish some."

"Oh!" Jean whispered, "see. He's got on the trousers that Cousin Roxina gave him this morning. What a shame! They are much too long and she told him over and over that he must not wear them till they were cut off."

"See here, George," the doctor said, walking up to him. "Let me see those trousers. They are too long for you, my boy. Tell your mother for me that she must cut them off, turn them up, and sew them. Do you understand?"

"An' so I did."

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"Well, what did she say?"

"Ma said put um on an' they'll wear off. An' so they will. They be all wearin' on the bottom now."

The doctor smiled, though he sighed, as he turned to Jean. "Wear off, Jean! They're a shiftless lot. But you're a good fisherman, George, and when you take your fish home to-night, tell your mother again what the doctor says about those trousers. The doctor says it this time, mind."

But George wagged his head. "Ma won't," he mumbled. "She won't." And he continued to angle with his string and his hickory pole for the fish which he called his brothers.

"We will walk on to the Long Pool," John said, peering at the water. "Ah, the sun's coming out. We shall have some good sport." He strode along the bank, Jean taking a run now and then to keep up.

The water, after rushing over the stones, widened suddenly into the Long Pool, swirling into a back-water close to their feet, banked by a shingle bed which extended the length of the stretch, shelving off into deep water which ran dark and oily under the farther bank, where, however, the sun caught the hard ridge of a gravel bed and turned it to a streak of amber. The bank, rain-rimed and glistening, fringed with dripping willow and alder, overhung the water in places, and it was just in those dark, deep spots that the trout were feeding. At the end of the pool the fish were rising.

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"Those are the little fellows, Jean. Now for a big one."

With a deft cast, John sunk his fly under the bank and worked it around to the middle of the stream, a dimple in the water following just behind it.

"Threw short," John muttered. "He followed me around. Have another try."

A yard more line from the reel this time, the fly sank under the bank, there was a swirl in the black water and the line tightened as John struck his fish. The reel sang, the trout rushed downstream under their feet, then back. John took in line as the fish made for the backwater at the head of the pool.

"The net, Jean. You must land him. Careful — careful. Steady. Well under! You've got him. Well done!" His eyes were on the child as with steady eye and hand she landed the fish. "She has nerve," he said to himself. "Comes up to the scratch every time." Aloud, "Three quarters of a pound, I should say." He held the shining thing in his hand for her inspection before slipping it into his bag. "Now, it's your turn."

"Oh, may I?" She was pale with interest — a little line of concentration between her eyebrows, as she took the rod, silent but intent on John's admonitions. "Keep the tip up. Cast as I did. That's not bad. Very good for a first try. Follow down the bank. The water's faster there, so you won't be so likely to 'put down' a fish. You are doing very well. Keep it up. Now, throw your line under the bank,

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and when you see a dimple strike quickly. But not too hard, Jean, not too hard. Then give him line, but not slack. Feel your fish all the time."

He watched her anxiously. How keen she was! Her lips compressed, her brow puckered, her slight figure braced, the colour mounting to her cheeks. How keen and how thoroughbred. How pretty she was growing!

A swirl in the water. Jean struck with might and main. "Oh, he's gone!" She turned a blank face.

"Gone with your fly. The cast did not hold. Wind up and try again. Bad luck!"

"But it's your turn now."

"Not a bit of it. You must take one first. Be careful. Not too hard this time. That's right. Good cast. By George, you're into one! Steady, now. He's coming upstream. Give him line. It is a big one. Steady — steady. Oh, he has bolted back again. He's well hooked. Reel in now steadily, slowly. I will land him. Keep a strain on the rod and let him run if he wants to. That's right, give him line. Now, bring him in again." John was almost as excited as the child as the fish came slowly in, half on its side showing a fin out of water. A last flop and John had it on the bank.

"Two pounds if it's an ounce, and played like a sportswoman. Nearly a record. Well done, Jean."

He took the rod. "We will fish down a bit farther. It's getting too cold to stay long. But we will have many more days. I will give you a rod of your own."

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Her cup of happiness was brimming.

The sun had set and the mists were filling the valley before the two, with a half-dozen smaller fish added to the bag, turned homeward.

"You've enjoyed it?" John Erskine asked abruptly.

Jean looked up at him, speechless with adoring eyes, and nodded. "Have you?"

"Oh, I am a confirmed fisherman. I always love it."

"And have you fished very often in many places?"

"Very often in very many."

"Where?"

"Here, and in Canada and Scotland and Norway."

"Were the fish very big? Was it more fun?"

Her voice was wistful, but he did not notice it. His thoughts were far away in that wider life which he had voluntarily renounced. He could feel the spring of Scotch heather under his feet and see the party assembled at dinner in the evening. The brilliant table, the pretty women in pretty clothes, the keen faces of the men — all came back to him. He had given up the life of ease which they typified, just as he had given up the furtherance of his profession along lines that he loved in Paris. And all for what? For the hideous muddle he had made of it here. What a fool he had been — what a mad man! A sick wave of longing swept over him for what now could never be, for what now he could never achieve. In the weariness of the moment he sighed bitterly.

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It did not need that to tell the child at his side that his heart was heavy within him. She had known it, as she always knew. But the sound gave her courage to slip her hand into his. His fingers tightened round it and held it fast while he fought down that moment of cowardice; then he drew the hand through his arm and they walked on in silence. When he spoke, it was in his usual voice.

"I bet you, Jean, that I know what Martha will say."

"So do I."

"Well, then, what?"

Jean laughed. "She'll say, 'Land sakes, Mr. John, more truck in my kitchen! No, take 'em out, I have n't time.'"

"Yes, and then what?"

"Oh, then, she'll say, 'Well, if you caught 'em, I s'pose you must have 'em.'"

"And then?"

"She'll end by taking them out of the bag, as pleased as we are, and she'll ask you how you want them cooked."

"Right — go up head." As they turned in at the gate they met young Rufus Haines, hurrying along. His greeting of the doctor was almost modest in his admiration.

"To choir practice?" John asked pleasantly.

"Yes, at Miss Vincent's. No one else could conveniently have us. Good-night, Dr. Erskine."

CHAPTER XIV

"I HOPE the room won't be too crowded," Mrs. Vincent said as the first knock sounded on her door.

"It does n't matter, mother, if it is," Lillian answered, going into the entry to open it. "It was good of you to have them at all."

"Good-evening. It's Mr. Tanner, mother. Put your hat and coat on the stairs, please. There won't be room on that hat-rack."

Mr. Tanner entered the room, walking stiffly with his knees together, in a state of painful embarrassment. He had snatched time to go home and put on a light-blue necktie in place of the everyday black string tie which he wore as in some way symbolic of his connection through drugs with medicine and the mysteries of life and death. His sandy hair was wet and smooth with vigorous brushing, and his large thin ears looked unusually prominent deprived of their ambush of locks. His high collar did not hide an Adam's apple which seemed constantly running up and down behind it. His front teeth were so prominent that he could not keep his mouth shut, which gave him rather the look of a rabbit.

Mrs. Vincent would have pitied his self-consciousness had she not known that his opinion of himself was high.

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After greeting her, he walked to the piano and solemnly scrutinised the music. Then, spreading his coat-tails, he sat down on the piano stool.

"This is just what I wished to try over," he announced in a high-pitched voice, and he proceeded to pick out part of the anthem with one finger.

Lillian returned her mother's look of annoyance with a shake of the head and a tolerant smile, and ran to open the door for Miss Meeks, Mrs. Beebe and her niece, Milly Levis, a pretty girl of sixteen, who was making one of her periodical visits. She was a bright brunette, round and trim, with a precocious manner, a nice girl, and a great admirer of Lillian. She had enough good feeling and good sense to blush on occasions for her aunt. The present was one of them, as Maria advanced importantly and shook hands with Mrs. Vincent condescendingly.

"Your room really ain't big enough for choir practice, is it?" she said, looking around. "Though I must say quite pleasant for one or two. I'd have been pleased to have it at my house, when I heard that Miss Savage could not have it at the parsonage as usual, but, you see, my best parlour is still shut up for the winter and I could n't ask Mr. Beebe to give up the sitting-room and the dining-room has n't any piano. We have so much room, it does seem a pity. But this is a nice little room, ain't it, Milly?"

"I have told you so before, aunt," the girl re-

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plied, colouring. "I like it better than any room I've ever been in," she went on quickly, turning to Lillian. "It's just right, I think, and I am going to have one like it some day."

Lillian smiled and nodded as she went again to the door, speaking back over her shoulder, "Oh, it's a poor little room. You should have seen the one I copied it from."

"Where was that?" Milly asked of Mrs. Vincent.

"It was the head mistress's sitting-room at Lillian's school, I believe. She is a woman who has travelled a good deal and knows about how things should be, I guess. Good-evening, Mr. Haines. Do you know Miss Milly Levis? If not, let me make you acquainted."

The young man bowed with mock deference, his hand on his heart. "I have had the pleasure for some time," he said, laughing, "but every time I see Miss Levis she has so outgrown my former impression of her — needless to say *how!*" he looked round at the others, smiling — "that I have to be introduced all over again."

The young girl blushed at the compliment, and Lillian answered for her. "We know how much practice you must have had, Mr. Haines, to be so ready, don't we, Milly?"

"Unkind!" he exclaimed dramatically. Then, turning sharply, "Hullo, Tanner! You look rather dejected. What's the matter? Been taking some of the wrong medicine? Cheer up! Let's see, who

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are we waiting for? We have our first sopranos — leading ladies, Miss Vincent, Miss Meeks — altos Mrs. Beebe, — good-evening, ma'am. Hope I see you in your usual health" — he bowed — "and in unusual voice, as the other alto is absent."

"I can sing second," Milly ventured.

"Good! Tenors, Mr. Tanner" — the gentleman in question cleared his throat — "and your humble servant. Bass — ah! Dave is the missing one."

"Shall we practise our parts separately until he comes?" Lillian suggested nervously.

"Good act. We will that. Clear off that stool, Tanner. Let Miss Vincent sit down." He adjusted the seat, placed the music for her with an attentive air which did not escape the mother, seated by her table in the background. He was certainly a brisk, good-looking young fellow, she thought, and they made a handsome pair as he leaned over the girl a moment, his dark head close to her fair one.

At that instant, as the music began, the front door opened; there was a step in the hall. Lillian Vincent coloured, bending closer to the music. She did not look up as David Donner entered the room, though every one else spoke, Rufus Haines's gay voice above the others.

"Late again, Dave. We will have to fine you. Though you are such a bloated landowner that you won't mind."

David Donner advanced without speaking. He was a big fellow, heavy of frame and somewhat

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slow of mind. His hair, according to his mother, was "black as a raven's wing"; it certainly had a romantic air of abundance, was blue-black, and framed a fine forehead. His face was clean-shaven and always wore a look of calm self-reliance combined with almost childlike simplicity.

There was a rearrangement of the group as he joined it, speechless as usual. Lillian greeted him casually over her shoulder, apparently absorbed in the music before her. But he was content as long as he could stand behind her, and in turning her music, brush her shoulder with the lapel of his best coat.

After an hour and a half of serious practising and much discussion, Lillian rose from the piano.

"You play the accompaniment, Milly. It is time for me to get the coffee."

"Let me help you," Mr. Haines said, whisking his handkerchief under his arm in mock mimicry of a waiter.

"No, really," Lillian said decidedly. "I don't need any one, thank you. The kitchen is so small that two are too many."

"Really?" He looked comically crestfallen. "Console me, Miss Milly."

The young girl shook her head, following the music. Lillian disappeared, but returned shortly, and it was David who took the heavy tray full of cups from her hands at the door.

The music ceased, and they all sat down to well-earned refreshment.

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"It has been bully coming here to-night, Miss Vincent," Rufus Haines said. "We owe Miss Savage thanks for the chance, though I'm sorry her father is ill."

"It is not serious, is it?" Lillian asked.

"No; Dr. Erskine says he's been overworking; sitting up half the night and all day over his Greek and not eating regularly. So they've put him to bed for a rest, but the doctor says he's got his books piled up all round him and Miss Savage reading aloud to him! He's a funny old gentleman!"

"The doctor and Jean Dimmock have been fishing for trout," Mr. Tanner vouchsafed importantly.

Mrs. Beebe sniffed audibly. "I do feel sorry for Miss Roxina. She has her hands full with that child, I guess. The doctor spoils her so."

"Spoils her?" cried Lillian quickly. "How do you mean, Mrs. Beebe?"

"Look at that new highfalutin' carriage he's got for her! And the airs she puts on."

"I don't think she does," Milly put in mildly.

"I call it goin' too far," her aunt went on, regardless of the silence. "Do you remember, Laura Meeks, how poor the Dimmocks were? Why, I know they did n't eat meat more than once a day. And now, see that child! I wonder what his sisters would say."

Young Haines looked at the woman with scarcely concealed dislike, as he answered in his usual flip-pant manner, with an undercurrent of meaning.

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"Oh, I gather, ma'am, that a small turn-out like that of Miss Jean's wouldn't be noticed by the doctor's sisters. It would be too small an affair compared to their coaches and yachts and all the rest of it. They're swells—regular swells. The one in Boston has married money and blue blood. No one better in this country. And the other married a lord."

"That's all very well," Maria cried, her cheek scarlet. "They may be great folks, but I'll bet a dollar they wouldn't sit by and see such goings-on."

"And I can't hear such unkind criticism in my house of a man to whom we all owe so much," Mrs. Vincent said quietly. "You won't mind my saying so, will you, Mrs. Beebe? The doctor has been so good to Lillian and me — just as he is to Jean Dimmock and every one else — that I should be ungrateful to listen in silence."

"You're right there, Mrs. Vincent," Rufus exclaimed with enthusiasm. "I always say he is a corker. Too good for Tacitus by a long way. Though I hope he won't go as long as I have to remain."

Maria Beebe rose. "He certainly leads you all by the nose," she said with an acid smile, "but I doubt if he would be much anywhere else or it stands to reason that he would not stay here. Come, Milly, say good-night. Are you coming, Laura Meeks? 'N' you, Mr. Tanner?"

Rufus had started to answer, but a warning glance from Lillian stopped him and he hurried to open the door for the departing guests.

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"Did I say too much?" Mrs. Vincent exclaimed. "I really could not let her go on."

"Not a bit," Rufus Haines assured her. "She deserved it. Did you see that little worm, Tanner, sit and listen and never say a word? Why, the doctor took him in out of charity. It's enough to make a fellow sick. Never said a word."

"Neither did David," Lillian said mischievously, looking up at the big fellow.

Rufus laughed. "Oh, David never does. But we always know that he's on the right side. You can count on David!"

David rose. "Good-night," he said pleasantly. "Good-night, Lillian."

"Good-night," Lillian answered. She still stood after he had passed into the hall.

Mr. Haines took the hint.

"I see I'm to go, too. Good-night, Miss Lillian."

The two young men left the house together.

"Why did you hurry Mr. Haines off?" her mother asked. "I like him so much."

"So do I, mother. But I am tired, and I did n't want him to stay after David. After all, David is my oldest friend."

"Yes," her mother answered, setting the room to rights. "But one is a bright young fellow from the city with a profession and the other is only a farmer, after all."

"That's so," Lillian answered in a tired voice. "What a rude woman that is!"

CHAPTER XV

"MISS JEAN, Miss Jean, the doctor wants you," Martha called Jean in from the garden, a day or two later.

As Jean reached the house, she found John Erskine standing in the door.

"Come," he said sharply. "Get your hat and coat. I have to drive to Northern Mills. A man has been hurt. Hurry!"

Jean, delighted at the summons, was ready on the steps when the carriage came round from the stable. The doctor glanced at her approvingly, helped her in and took his place by her side in the buggy, behind the pair of roadsters. He had not asked her if she would like to go with him, for a drive on such a day was a privilege, and they had twenty miles to cover. The doctor was silent, and Jean, catching the mood, became mouse-like. Besides, a country wayside in May is company enough for any one. Everything had its part in the joyous spring song; the blossoming fruit trees, the roadside purple with violets, the greening trees, the yellow of cowslip marshes, the flitting and carolling of birds, the blue of the sky, the low sailing clouds and the soft wind sang the wonderful glad song of awakening to Jean. She sighed.

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The doctor turned. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Oh! it was a happy sigh — was it?" he said.

She nodded shyly.

"Jean," he said incisively, "remember. There is nothing in the world — no pleasure — no amusement — no corner of greatness or grandeur in any town ever built in any country that can equal the joy of a mile of May in a green land."

She nodded again. John Erskine laughed at her serious face.

"Paris in May!" he added scornfully. "*Paris* in May, Jean!" He stopped short, the light dying from his face, and now he, in his turn, sighed. "Paris in May," he repeated in a low voice. And then he turned and looked over the little valley, enclosed by hills, up whose fertile basin their road was winding.

"It is a fair prospect, Jean," he said.

"Tell me about Paris in May," she begged. The words had taken her fancy. "When were you there, — long ago?"

"Long ago," he answered. "Very long ago."

Jean looked up, studying his face. "It could not be *very*," she said. "I don't think you are a bit old — generally. Not nearly as old as papa — but other times — There *now*! You look old — old."

"I am old, Jean," he said.

She knew that she had hurt him. But how? She sank back, miserable. She hated the look that she brought sometimes to his face — a look half-fear,

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half-pain. She had seen it just now twist his lips and bring the beads of moisture to his forehead. She looked up at him with worshipping eyes. He was the most wonderful man in the country, every one said. Perhaps in all the world.

John Erskine was absorbed in his thoughts. But, mindful of the child, he roused himself.

"Paris in May," he said with an effort, his mind returning to Jean's request. "Lilacs, Jeanie, and blue haze along the quays and — " He stopped. "Green and gold," he said. "Sunshine and gossamer — a prism city. It is in your hands to turn it as you will. Catch light from heaven or — hell. No — no, Jean. Paris in May does not hold a candle to this — but — there's the blue haze along the quays."

"Why don't you go there?" she asked softly, but there was a quiver in her voice.

"Why? My work is here, Jean," he said decidedly. "Can anything compare with this blue above us and the green down the meadow? And we should miss the birds, Jeanie. Mr. Browning's 'thrush who sings his song twice over' has no place in Paris. Ah, Jean, if *we* could ever recapture the first fine careless rapture. But we can't. Gone, Jean, and we are on our way to help a man who is hurt — crushed out of life, perhaps — at the mills."

He relapsed into silence. Jean twisted her fingers under the robe in her endeavour to muster courage for speech.

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"Please don't!" she jerked out finally. "You are so good."

He started. "Good!" he cried. "Good God! Never say that again. Do you hear? I am doing my duty, that is all."

At his harsh tone, the tears started, but they were stopped before Dr. Erskine could notice them, and a few moments later, a little before noon, they drove into the village of Northern Mills.

Northern Mills is a collection of flimsy wooden structures on the edge of the North Woods.

Here, where the logs come down the creek from the mountains, the sawmills stand, and gathered about them, with no attempt at symmetry, are the unpainted, weather-beaten wooden buildings which house the men employed in milling or logging; and raised above them on a hill to the right stand the company store and the one miserable hostelry that the place possesses.

This hotel boasts, as do most of its kind, of an undersized billiard table and an oversized bar, and exists more for the quenching of immoderate thirsts than for the housing of modest travellers. As the doctor drove up to the narrow porch, the only sign of life was supplied by a man, the proprietor, who sat tipped back in a Congress chair against the wall by the barroom door, his hat on the back of his head and his feet on the railing. At sight of the doctor he let down the front legs of his chair, sat up, stretched his shirt-sleeved arms, shifted the

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quid of tobacco he was chewing, spit copiously under the railings into the street, rose, pushed his hat forward on his head, and finally came with a slovenly gait down the steps, where the doctor had stopped his horses.

"B'lieve they're waiting fer yer, Doctor," he said with a nod. "Jim's a goner, I guess."

"Call your wife, man," Dr. Erskine answered shortly. "Get down, Jean. Here, Mrs. Osborne, I must leave Jean in your care. She has her luncheon. It's in the basket behind. Take care of yourself, my dear. Jump in here, Osborne; I will drive on to the mill and you can take back the horses."

Osborne climbed into the wagon with loose-limbed alacrity. The doctor lifted the reins and they were off.

Jean stood watching them go.

"You don't mind your pa's leavin' you, do you?" the woman asked.

She was a meagre creature dressed in a dingy calico wrapper, her hair and eyes alike pale and faded. She looked the very spirit of her bare, unlovely surroundings. Yet so short a way from her door were the beauty of the spring, the majesty of the forest and the mountain peace.

"Dr. Erskine is not my father," Jean answered quietly; "and of course he must go to the man."

The woman led the way into a small bare room whose only furniture was a large mirror in a black frame, shrouded in pink mosquito netting, a long

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narrow table covered with red-and-white oilcloth, a few kitchen chairs, and a pair of tin spittoons on the dirty floor.

"You'll be all right here," the woman said. "Nobody comes in here. Unless you'd rather come into the kitchen? The baby's teethin' and frettin' a good deal. Have you all you want?"

"Yes, thank you," Jean answered.

"Your pa — the doctor, I mean — won't be back for a long while, so you can settle down. I'm a newcomer here — we come from up the creek a piece, but I hear tell often of the doctor. He's a kind man."

Jean flushed with sudden resentment. How could any one know how kind he was! She wished the woman would go. She would not open her little hamper till she was alone. Fortunately the teething baby now made itself heard, and the woman regretfully turned to leave. "He sut'nly is kind," she repeated, "givin' help and food and money's well as doctorin'. That child can scream. Nothin' the matter with his lungs — Comin', Howard Osborne!"

Jean had wondered a little how she should spend the time of Dr. Erskine's absence with the thought of the injured man for company, but her doubts vanished when she found, at the bottom of her basket, a copy of the "Morte d'Arthur." Dr. Erskine had promised it to her last week, and he had remembered it to-day.

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Between mouthfuls of chicken sandwiches, — the chicken shredded and browned in butter in Martha's own delectable manner, — she made acquaintance with the great book of romance, forgetting Northern Mills, Jim, the bare hotel, the ugly room, place, and time, as page after page unfolded the sublimated fairy tale for her enchantment.

Mrs. Osborne looked in upon her once or twice as the afternoon waned, but she received no encouragement to linger from the figure in the hard chair, leaning with arms on the table and head over an open book.

When the doctor finally came himself to call her, Jean started up with dazed eyes and a tired, flushed face. She looked at him, unseeing, for an instant.

"Wake up, Jean," he commanded. "The horses are waiting."

"I was n't asleep," she protested, following him to the door, with the book under her arm. She climbed dreamily into the buggy and sat down. As he took his place by her side, the doctor felt her shiver.

"Put on your coat," he said irritably. "I don't want you ill on my hands."

It was not until they were out of the town that Jean remembered the object of their drive.

"Oh, the man!"

"Dead." The doctor's voice was stern.

Launcelot and Perceval, Boris and Medor van-

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ished down the vale of romance at this touch of reality. "And I never once thought of him," she cried with a little gasp. "What can I do?"

"Nothing. You forgot, selfishly. You cannot undo that forgetting, but you can face your fault — not run away from it. Do you hear?"

"It was the book — " she began.

"The book!" he exclaimed; "the book! and later, it is what? A woman, a career, fame — our selfishness seeks an excuse. Self — self — self." The words came fiercely.

Jean, but half-understanding, yet ashamed, drew back in her corner. The sun was near its setting. The valley air was chill. Another mile in a silence broken only by the pleasant rhythm of the trotting horses' hoofs. Then suddenly John Erskine roused himself from the bitter reverie into which he had fallen and looked at the child.

"Jean, you are cold." He drew in the horses. "We'll stop a moment and wrap up. Draw up the robe. Let me put it well round you — whoa — here's the cape. Now, are you snug? You are getting to be a big girl, Jean. A big girl needs friends."

"I have you."

"A nice friend! An old person. No, I may do for a guide and philosopher, but you need younger friends." He struck the horses with a sharp flick.

Jean laughed the gay little laugh that came seldom. "It's so funny to hear you," she said. "You really don't think that any one in Tacitus could be

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as young a friend as you! No one half as amusing as you are."

"I was n't thinking of Tacitus." He refused to be anything but serious. "But of New York, of Boston." The words fell gravely. John Erskine was far away, thinking of many things.

The silence that followed was so long that he finally noticed it and turned to look down at the child by his side. Her head under the little round hat with the scarlet wing was turned from him, and the black hair shaded the small face. But the slender figure was tense. He knew that her hands were tightly clasped under the robe.

"My dear — what is it?"

At the kind voice, she drew a long breath. "I don't want to go." In her tone there was an odd mingling of obstinacy and supplication.

"Go?"

"To New York — or Boston. I don't want to." She rushed on. "I have lived here always — papa and mamma lived here — I belong here — I don't want to go — you have no right to make me —" Her voice was shaking.

His kindliness checked a laugh.

"You certainly shall not go while you feel like this about it — not against your will."

She felt rather silly. She knew that he hated any lack of self-control.

He divined her feelings and wished to save her pride. "Here's a good bit of road," he said, as they

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rounded a bend and saw a stretch of smooth country going before them. "The pair are quiet. Take the reins and drive for a bit. Remember what I have told you. Look out for the off one — he still shies."

Taken out of herself by this unlooked-for privilege, for the spirited pair were a recent purchase, she sat up alert, the colour rushing to her sensitive face, her eyes flashing as she took the reins.

John Erskine watched her critically as she handled the horses. They tossed their heads restively as they felt the change of hand, but he saw that she kept a firm, light grip on them.

"Very good," he commented, as he finally laid his hand over hers as they neared the village. "You drive very well. Another day, another lesson. Keep the point of your whip up, remember, if you want to drive with style."

"It is such fun. I have had such a lovely day," she answered. Then, with a slight hesitation, but a certain dignity as well, she turned and looked at him. "Your promise. You know you promised."

"Promised?"

"About New York, or anywhere." She smiled. "You did! And you promised other things the other day! To give me more books to read, and to let me stay in the study with you and to give me lessons. I must learn such a lot. And can't I help you with your book? I think I could."

"So you can." With a smile that wonderfully

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changed his face, he put his arm around her, and drew her to him. As he did so, his words of the afternoon returned to him. Only doing his duty? But the duty had become so sweet. The child had grown into his heart. If duty and pleasure were one, how should the balance be struck? He quickly put the child away from him.

CHAPTER XVI

As the time slipped by, Constance Savage had found that the difference which she and her father made in John Erskine's life was rather negative than positive. She would not own to herself that she was disappointed.

It was inevitable that they should often meet in the village. Constance had been born with the vocation to help, and she was generally to be found where there was illness or trouble. She was sure to follow John in his ministrations when she did not actually precede him, and at these times she saw him at his best, saw the skill and the strength as well as the humour which he put at the service of his people.

He always seemed glad to see her, teased her a little about stealing his practice, asked for her father, and that was the end. It was seldom that he came to the house, unless her father was ill. When he did, Mr. Savage seized him and carried him off to his study, where he feverishly stated his latest difficulty and begged for John's advice.

With every prospect for it fair, the friendship did not seem to grow beyond a polite and very sincere mutual regard.

How much of this was due to the small disturbing influence of Jean, neither of them realised. That

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she was disturbing, there was no doubt. Indeed, when it came to any question of Constance other than that of music, she was either quietly, unobtrusively obstinate or elfishly perverse.

"Marian Gray writes me that she has written to you again, asking you to allow Jean to visit her," Constance said as she and John came down from her father's bedroom. They paused at the door of the sitting-room.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Please do." It was long since he had asked this permission. She was very happy. There was a quiet joy in offering him the deepest chair, in seeing him comfortable in her room, by her fireside.

"Yes, Marian has written again," John said, "but Jean will not go."

Constance smiled. "Will not," she said.

"At least she does not want to," John amended hastily; "and I see no reason why she should undergo the ordeal if she feels as she does."

Constance frowned slightly, looking intently at the fire. "No," she said slowly; "unless it is for her own good. You probably know best." There was silence for a moment; then Constance went on slowly, "She is a very difficult child to understand. Just when I think that I have broken down the barrier finally and may get to know her, I find that, intangible as it is, she has raised it again."

"Really." John's voice was not hearty.

"Yes, really," she repeated warmly, looking up.

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"I have come to the conclusion that Jean does n't like me. It is a confession of failure, and I am humiliated." Her voice was full of feeling.

"Oh, I am sure that you are mistaken," John interposed hurriedly. "She is very fond of you, Miss Savage, I know. And she is most interested in her music."

"In her music! Ah, yes. There you are quite right. And since I am the only medium through which she can arrive at it, she tolerates me. Truly, it's nothing more. She is the most interesting child, musically, that I have ever met. Outside of that, we simply do not touch. I am sorry it is so, but so it is."

"I am sorry, too," John Erskine said, after a moment's silence. "Jean has so few possible companions here." His voice was disheartened.

Constance Savage looked up. "Oh, you must not worry about her," she said earnestly. "I have never seen a girl who seemed to live a happier life. How you've done it, I don't see. There seems to be no shadow left."

John Erskine rose. "You don't know," he said. "Jean feels intensely. When she is happy, she is happy, yet there are times when she suffers, too. But about Marian's letter. You would not make her go?"

Constance hesitated. "It seems a pity that she should not go, and get to know Marian's children. It would be more normal, would n't it?"

"Yes," John agreed. "For the ordinary child,

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it would be the thing to do. But for Jean, I am not so sure. Now, I must be off. I've a long drive before me yet. Of course I do not need to tell you how much I appreciate all that you have done for Jean. I am very grateful."

"Please don't," she said with quiet firmness. "I don't want thanks. I only wish — but never mind!" She put out her hand. "We may be better friends as she grows older. Did father tell you that he has arranged an exchange for the summer? That we want to get to the sea?"

"I am afraid you find us a dull lot," he said, looking at her for the first time with concern.

She returned his glance honestly. "No," she said, "to be truthful, I don't. I like Tacitus. But I am fond of my friends, and I shall be glad to meet some of them again at York Harbour."

"Don't be gone too long," he said, "when you do go. Your pensioners would find it hard to do without you."

"That's nice of you," she answered. "But the people here really care about no one living as long as they have you."

"We disagree there," he declared. "Keep your father away from his books if you can. But don't wear yourself out. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered.

He was gone, polite as always — so unfailingly polite — Well, she asked herself, what more did she want?

CHAPTER XVII

JOHN ERSKINE had long since kept his promise to Jean. He had realised when she had outgrown Miss Roxina and he had taken her teaching into his own hands.

She prepared her lessons in the mornings and they worked together in the study from five to seven. These were hours full of delight and interest to both the man and the girl. Jean was eager to work, ambitious to excel, and exceptionally intelligent. She liked Latin, history, and literature, but found mathematics difficult. It was consequently on these that the doctor insisted, drilling her with infinite time and labour, demonstrating and explaining until, from a thorough dislike of these subjects, she grew to an interest in them, seeing there not dull facts and figures only, but the wide field they gave for the imaginative faculty.

It was not only in actual learning that she gained, however, but from the daily intercourse with a man of trained mind — from the long talks that interspersed and followed the lessons. Talks not confined to the daily subjects, but which, prompted by the books or the journals which lay on the study-table, ranged over wide topics. He told her of places and people. He interested her in France and Germany, then started her on French and German.

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At all times he put his thoughts and theories into words for her.

"What I want to give you, Jean, are *wide* sympathies, a *wide* outlook," he explained one night when they were in their accustomed places in the study, John in his deep chair, leaning back, his legs outstretched, and Jean at the writing-table, facing him, "Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard" open before her. The blue curtains were drawn at the high windows, a fire burned on the hearth, the big shaded lamps were lighted, and the whole room glowed with the subdued colour of rugs, pictures, and the bindings of many books. "Women have the faults of their position as homekeepers," he went on. "While we have for centuries lived a life in touch with general interests, women have been kept within four walls. So they are apt to be petty, narrow —"

Jean nodded. "I know," she said; "but I won't."

John stopped, looking at her over the pipe he was lighting. What a keen face it was, with its wide forehead and luminous eyes, its faint flush now of interest, as she talked, her eyes on the paper before her.

"No, I won't, J.E. Because I detest it!" She looked up. "But it's funny, J.E., the pettiness — it is n't all women. First, there's Cousin Roxina, who teaches me her religion and *pettys* over everybody else's way of thinking. Then there's dear, darling Mr. Owens, who gives me some of his religion, and he *pettys* over the Methodists; and I dare

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say that Mr. Bowles would give me another point of view and would *petty* most awfully over us. And, by the way, J.E., I've wanted to tell you. May I believe what I please? Or must I believe what they tell me? And if I believe what I am told — which? About God, I mean — those things — ”

“Those things,” John Erskine repeated. He was aware of the incongruity of such words in this old house.

“Yes, J.E.,” impatiently; “God and dying, heaven and the rest. When I feel, back in my mind, that things are not true, must I believe them?”

“No.” He answered deliberately.

“Good, J.E. I knew you'd say that! You see, it's not that I don't *want* to believe anything Cousin Roxina tells me — I just *can't* believe! When she solemnly says —

‘ ’T is religion that doth give
Lasting pleasures while we live;
’T is religion must supply
Sweetest comfort when we die,’ —

I do not believe it. You see, religion does not give me half the pleasure that riding or music or work does, for instance. And I'm sure it won't help me when I die, unless I have done a few of the things I want to do — ” She paused, interrogating him with her eyes. But as he continued to smoke gravely without answering, she went on — “I don't think people use their minds in believing. Cousin Rox does n't, nor Martha — oh, heaps don't. They

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are just poured into a believe mould when they are little. There are lots of moulds, J.E." She was carried away by her idea. "There are moulds for everything we ought to do and think. People get set in them like jelly and turn out all in the right shape. Only a few don't have enough stiffening and they squash down and spread all out and trickle about. That's me! I'm trickling all over." She laughed ruefully.

"Well," John's voice halted her. It conveyed reproof.

"There. You got that tone in a mould when you were little, J.E.! That's part of what I can't do. I hate making my voice different and looking solemn when I speak of God or dying. Can't you see, J.E.?" She struck the table with an impatient fist. "I want to take it all as *just part of living*. I can't explain, but it makes me go all hot and mad when people hush their voices in a kind of pretend to talk of these things. I just want to shout, 'Hullo, God,' and laugh when I say it. Of course I *would n't*, J.E. But" — she drew a long breath — "I hate pretending." She drew lines on the blotter, her forehead puckered for a moment. "I think everything's odd," she announced sweepingly.

"So do I," John agreed grudgingly. He was surprised at himself. Of late the strangeness of life had ceased to amaze him. Was it because he was growing older that his mind had resorted to an inherited acceptance of divine ordination?

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"Do you?" Jean was delighted. "Do you really think everything odd, J.E.? Because most people don't see that anything could be different."

"Most people!" John Erskine mocked.

"Oh, I know from books," she declared, "and from Tacitus. They take what they see, and what is told them, as the only thing that can be."

"How do you know that it is n't?"

It was her turn for scorn. "Because I know. And I think, probably, most of what is, is n't right — was n't meant."

John Erskine sat up in his chair. "What's this?"

She nodded, laughing back. "Because nearly every one — not you and me — has been blind to what really is meant—" She stopped. "I am muddled. Yet, I know what I mean, J.E. Just to always see the truth — and go for it." She was looking at him, yet beyond him. "You know, J.E.," she said.

"I know — I know," he repeated under his breath; "oh, I know, Jean." He stopped short. "I wanted to teach you — I wanted —" He stopped again. "I want every good thing for you, my child," he added slowly, with unusual feeling in his voice.

Jean broke the silence that followed.

"Shall I go on reading, J.E.?"

"Poor child," he sighed. "Why should you be obliged to suffer my moods? Yes — go on. Where did we leave off last night?"

"Where Bonnard is turned away from the school gates."

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"I remember. Go on. Read slowly and mind your accent."

"I hate it, you know," she said ruefully. "I am sure that it does not sound in the least like French."

He smiled. "It's a fair imitation. Go ahead."

"But are n't you rather bored with him, J.E.? He is a silly old thing."

"Don't be impertinent."

She turned a coaxing face to him. "I am rather tired of it, J.E. You said that I might begin to help you with your work to-night."

"Work." His eyes brightened. "Well, put it aside for to-night, then, since you are out of the mood. It is too good to slight. If you really want to help me — " He crossed the room to his desk between the windows, failing to realise how cleverly the girl had turned his depression to interest.

"If you'd like to," he said with boyish eagerness, "you can verify these references for me after supper. There is such a mass of stuff to get through. I will show you how, Jean. You can be a great help. It is the detail in a work like this that takes the time. This is a package of German textbooks on the subject which has just come. When you are more advanced, you can help me very much with the translations."

She stood at his shoulder, her face keen. Something in her, the heritage of New England, longed for difficult proving, longed for a test that should try her. She wished that she might forego something

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that she liked to prevail. She was tense with ambition. All that was hard seemed glorious. All that was easy, despicable.

Body like mind shared in this. The joy in the cold bath in the morning, in the fatigue after exercise, were part of this aspiration. She longed to be tempered like steel — as cold and as pure. A flame burned in her grey eyes. Her voice in its strength of purpose surprised him, used as he was to her unexpectedness.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “I shall work. It’s splendid, and perhaps I should never have known it if it had not been for you.”

“Good,” he said gaily, rising. “That’s all right. We shall do great things together if you feel like that. But we must n’t be late for supper. Cousin Roxina has a grievance against us now.”

As he opened the door for Jean to pass out, he added, “I saw Miss Savage to-day. She asked me if I thought you could drive her to make a call somewhere to-morrow. What it is to be mistress of a horse and trap! I told her you would be there at three o’clock. Is that all right?”

Her reply was inaudible. He sighed impatiently. What a pity that Constance Savage’s hope did not come to pass. It would make it all so much simpler if only Jean could become attached to her. As he passed through the hall, he glanced at Jean, going up the dimly lit stair. He thought that it was a gloomy house for a young girl. But, as she reached

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the landing, she turned, and, smiling, kissed her hand to him. It was a slight thing, charmingly done, but it reassured John. She could not be very unhappy with him and yet look like that, he thought.

CHAPTER XVIII

OUTWARDLY calm, but inwardly strained and uncomfortable, Jean sat in her scarlet-wheeled run-about the next day, waiting at the parsonage steps for Miss Savage. She had never felt at ease with Constance, for a preconceived dislike had poisoned their intercourse. In the grip of it Jean lost all her charm, her gaiety, and originality. In Constance's presence, she became a silent, stolid child, talking in strangled monosyllables. Ashamed, and in a vain endeavour to excuse herself, she told herself that Constance criticised her, found her dull and stupid.

Yet, always, as to-day, the sight of Constance gave the lie to her own absurd self-vindication, while it did not remove the latent antagonism which both felt, yet neither could explain.

Now, as Jean politely tucked the green robe around her, Constance tried to say the right and pleasant thing.

"Dr. Erskine said that you would come for me. He is always so kind. Are you sure you did not mind? I want so much to go out and see Mrs. Bullock, George's mother. He was doing some work for me yesterday and he said that she was ill enough to be in bed, and from what I could get out of him there is not much food fit for a sick woman to eat

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in the house. You know where they live — the other side of the Sand Hill."

"I think I know. I have never been there — never been to the Sand Hill. But you can see it for miles down the other valley."

"Never been! How odd, Jean. I thought you knew every foot of this country."

"It has just happened, I suppose. Besides, the road does not lead to anywhere, and when I drive with J.E., he is always making his rounds. But it's quite easy to go. It's out beyond the cemetery." She flicked the cob, which trotted briskly away up the street.

"What a perfect fall day!" the elder woman exclaimed. "I don't think any place is more beautiful than this valley in the autumn. Such glorious air! Isn't it clear! And the intense blue sky and the great white clouds — and then, the colouring of the trees on the hills. Look at that dash of scarlet over there and the yellows and crimsons beyond!"

Jean, vibrating to the colour, deliberately shut her ears to the pleasant commonplaces.

The cob followed the road which rose gradually out of the village to the top of the hill. There they had a view of the valley at their backs, where the blue smoke curled up from chimneys nestling in trees now turned every gorgeous hue. Here, a mile from the village, was the tiny, brown wooden station. The station 'bus which ran to the village stood waiting for the daily train from Attica. One

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or two men lounging about the steps nodded to Jean and Constance. In Tacitus they never take off their hats.

Once across the railroad track the view spread wide and glorious as far as the eye could reach. It always reminded Jean of the pictures of the Holy Land in the big Bible. It was just such a wide land, rolling to the horizon, dotted with single stately elms, instead of palms, and watered by the wide Canada Creek instead of the Jordan. Off to the right a rise of land showed white shafts amid the green of hemlocks — the graveyard.

Their road led straight down along the creek where the waysides were full of the treasures of autumn, every corner overflowing with crimson sumac, tall goldenrod, and purple and lavender asters.

"How lovely it is," Constance said. "So beautiful that one is tempted to try and express it. Dr. Erskine says that you know a great deal of poetry."

"Yes, I do." Jean was keenly self-conscious.

"Won't you say some to me? I am so fond of it."

Jean touched the cob. "Oh, I only know stupid old things that everybody knows," she said quickly.

All through the field that bordered the road the great orange pumpkins burned, and the Indian corn stood stacked, like little wigwams, the tasselled ends fluttering in the winds. A hawk floated high over the creek upon wide pinions.

It was one of those brilliant fall days when the

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world seems held in a crystalline spell, suspended in its perfection for a poignant moment before change and dissolution, and Jean was penetrated by the beauty of it all, heart contracted, eyes stung with tears.

Yet Constance at her side, longing for some hold upon her affection, was unmoved by her emotion — ignorant thereof. She talked pleasantly of the hundred and one small matters of which village life is made and wondered much to find the girl at her side so unresponsive.

Suddenly, with a whisk of his tail, the cob was turned off the main road that wound its way on to Attica.

"The cemetery," Constance said in a hushed voice.

They creaked up the rise of ground and Jean touched the cob with the whip without turning to look in at the iron gates.

"I hope they'll have a good day for to-morrow," Constance said. "It's the cemetery picnic."

"Yes, I know." Jean's voice was constrained. "I have to walk over early with Cousin Roxina. It's really too far for her to walk, but she is afraid of horses."

Constance relapsed into silence. She was thinking of the tragedy here which had given this child into John Erskine's care.

The road ran on now between neglected fields, then changed to a grassy wood track where the run-

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about ran noiselessly. The soil had changed from loam to sand. The thin wood growth was of pine and white birch, the ground was patterned with running evergreen. The cob slowed down to a walk and Jean woke to a curious joy in the place. Here, of all certainty, one was near to that unseen something that she felt so strongly. Why had she never been here before? To this place she would return.

The road left the wood and entered a waste of white sea-sand — yet the sea was two hundred miles away. There were pine trees away to the left, and before them the track was lost in places where the sand had drifted.

“What a strange place,” Constance exclaimed. “It seems a pity that it can’t be reclaimed. But I suppose nothing would grow here.”

“No.”

“Rather a dismal place to live in, is n’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose the Bullocks put their shanty here because the land has no value. They are squatters. It is just a little way ahead around the bend. You will see, the road creeps across a gully and the house clings to the edge on the other side.”

“Yes.”

The jutting sandbank rounded, Jean gave an exclamation. The road was cut in the side of a steep gully where the sand slipped and slid year after year. At the far side of this gully clung a hut. There Jean drew rein. Constance got out with her basket

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of food and knocked. A man answered. The door was opened and Constance went in. In a moment the door again opened and a man came out. Though she knew all the people for miles around by sight, Jean could not remember ever having seen this face before. He was a tall man, and his dress and bearing made Jean think him a North Woods trapper. He carried an old shot-gun. He was scowling as he stepped out, but stopped short at sight of Jean and nodded. She bowed, expecting him to pass on, but he stood still.

"I know ye," he said bluntly.

Jean smiled. "I don't think you do," she said, "unless you have seen me with Dr. Erskine. I live with him."

He shook his head. "Before that. I knew your pa and your ma. They been here — come to see me, too. You favour your mother. You be as dark as she."

"My mother came here!" Jean cried.

The man laughed shortly. "Queer place. She came with your pa, the minister." He took a step away, then stopped. "See here, I hate all this damned meddling," he said. "The old woman's got enough to eat. I'll feed her, don't you fret."

He turned on his heel, then again turned back. "What d'ye come for?" he asked. "Are n't ye afraid of the sand slippin'? Your ma was. She is," he pointed into the house, — "the old woman is — and the boy. It won't slip before its time. Good-

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day to ye — and don't come again — we don't want ye."

Jean sat staring at him with amazed, indignant eyes. "Your wife's ill," she said; "George said so."

He nodded. "Then it's the doctor's business, not yours," he said shortly. "He can come if he wants. He came to me." He nodded, and went up the bank, behind the hut.

Constance came out a moment later. "Poor thing — she's cowed," she said. "I suppose she can never be well. George is a comfort to her, she says. I imagine that the man is a brute."

Jean turned the carriage. "He remembers my father and mother," she said. "They once came here."

The drive back was silent, and once at home Jean ran up to her bedroom in no happy mood, pulling off her hat and coat. Inside the closed door, she clenched her hands.

"Oh, Jean Dimmock, what a wretch you are — mean, sneaking, contemptible, supercilious little cat. What would J.E. say if he knew!" She caught up the brush and, standing before the glass, gazed steadily at the small, intense face which gazed back at her. "You be decent, do you hear!" she admonished. The image in the glass frowned back at her. She fell to brushing her heavy black hair, her eyes still holding the eyes in the glass. "Wretched little thing," she adjured herself; and then, pitching the brush on the bed, went down to supper.

CHAPTER XIX

"I WISH that we did not have to go before the people came," Jean declared the next morning, as she and Miss Roxina climbed the stone wall by the steps which led out of the graveyard to the path through the fields to the village. "I have never been at a cemetery picnic. It seems rather snobbish not to stay."

Miss Roxina did not answer directly, but trotted anxiously along the path, intent on getting home.

Jean, who was talking idly, went on — "Mr. Savage never comes — nor Miss Savage."

"They have no folks buried here," Miss Roxina explained. "And there is no reason for *our* staying because Cousin John pays Mr. Spiller to take care of our lots. They are the only ones in the graveyard that are properly looked after; all that we have to do is to take the flowers over to decorate the graves. They looked beautiful to-day. Every one will see them — the pansy wreath and the white cross. If we hurry, Jean, we will be home by half-past ten. Martha must give you a glass of milk and a ginger cake before you begin to study."

Jean laughed. "It would n't hurt anybody if I stayed," she said carelessly. "I hate taking over the flowers just because people will see them."

"Not just because," Cousin Roxina corrected.

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“But it is fitting that our plots should look remembered. Come, don’t dawdle, Jean.”

For answer Jean darted ahead along the path down the steep hill, and vaulted the fence at the bottom where she stopped short, waiting.

“If I did n’t run away from her sometimes, I should burst,” she said to herself as she braided her hair which had shaken loose. A moment later the old lady joined her and they sedately entered the village together.

Meanwhile, vehicles, converging from all parts, met at the cemetery gate. There were buggies and there were two-seated spring wagons, drawn by farm-horses and filled with family parties. They drew up before the gate, where the women-folk got down, helped out the children, and lifted down babies and baskets of provisions, as well as such tools as would be required for the day’s work: scythes, sickles, spades. Then the wagons drove on into a neighbouring field where the horses had their bridles removed and their feeding-bags fastened on, and were left for the day in charge of George Bullock to whom the village tacitly relegated all such simple “jobs.”

The cemetery presented a cheerful appearance. All down its centre avenue, spaced by hemlock trees, were groups of people, the old women and girls for the most part in straw hats, trimmed with bright flowers or ribbons, black skirts and coloured waists; the men generally in their ordinary working boots

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and breeches, with a white collar and tie and better coat to mark the holiday. Men and women naturally gravitated into separate groups. It was not till the afternoon that the young people mixed.

Mrs. Beebe, in the latest mode, had as usual assumed command of the female contingent. She had collected the most important housewives in a knot and was endeavouring to persuade them to pool supplies and have a general luncheon party under the big hemlock in the ornamental circle at the end of the avenue, instead of each small party lunching, as was the custom, within its own enclosure. For once she was unsuccessful.

"Don't see, Mrs. Beebe, as how we can," Mrs. Donner objected. "Men are sot. My man wants to eat his vittles plumb on his grandfather's tombstone. I don't say but your way ain't the most select, but he will have it so. An' I have to bring the same vittles that his mother used to bring when he was a little shaver — cold sausage and pickles and cold apple-pie, and I dare n't put in a single new thing, not even a loaf and seed-cake that the children like so much."

The other women shared her view. "Don' seem 's if 't were the right thing eatin' together 's if 't were a common picnic," Mrs. Spiller said mildly.

Maria sniffed. "I never can get used to your Tacitus ways, though it is twenty years now since I came here. I can't see why you can't eat together in the cemetery as well as talk together. But I

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suppose you have your own little reasons, which we people from outside never will understand. Miss Meeks, you're comin' to help me trim the grass in our plot, ain't you?"

Miss Meeks, who dared not lose the patronage of her best customer, meekly followed Maria.

"The idea of Mrs. Spiller speaking up. I don't call it good taste, her husband being the undertaker and all," Maria declared disdainfully. "Our plot ain't very interesting," she apologised. "No stones yet, nor won't be till Sam or me steps out. But I do like to keep it mowed and I don't b'lieve there's a stone coping in the graveyard any handsomer than ours."

"Yes, it does look handsome," Laura Meeks agreed; "and your monument too is rich, I think. It looks funny, though, all blank, without any names on it."

"Time'll mend that," Maria declared cheerfully, as they arrived before the shaft of grey granite in question, which bore in large letters at its foot the name of "Beebe." "Sam 'n' I had dreadful times decidin' on that stone! I was dead set on a white marble column broke off, with ivy growing up it and a dove on top. It was just sweet. But Sam got his way for once. He said he could n't see himself under that trademark! He wanted something stanch and noble. So we decided on this and it was ten dollars cheaper than the white, too. I like it now myself."

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"Are n't you goin' to plant any flowers?" Miss Meeks asked, settling down on her heels to hack energetically away at the grass with a sickle, while Mrs. Beebe deposited her basket at the foot of the monument and stood looking on.

"Well — no. Flowers are so messy. And between you and me I notice that the best people don't have 'em. Have you noticed the Erskines' plot? Not a flower, only gravel paths and grass. Of course that's a big plot, so they can afford to have paths."

"Maybe you're right and it is more chaste!" Miss Meeks agreed; "but flowers are cheerful. Periwinkle's a good coverer, too, if you want covering. But you've got such good turf. You don't need it."

Maria pinned up her skirt and prepared to assist.

Over all the graveyard rose the hum of pleasant human sounds. To a stranger this combining of a filial rite with a summer's outing might have raised a smile, but the Tacitus people were too simple to see any humour in their custom. It was certainly more pleasant and practical to choose a day when all might gather, and working together "ready up" the cemetery for another year, than for each family to come alone and put its own little corner in order. Nor was there any disrespect to the dead in their familiarity, but rather something approaching the old Greek feeling.

While the men, after much consultation and head-scratching, had apportioned the general work of

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cutting the grass on the overgrown avenue, of trimming the trees and raking up dead leaves and branches, the mothers gathered the children to the graves of their families, and while they made all neat and trim, related to them, often in a hushed voice and with moist eyes, the story of those who were gone; stories which they could never forget — of the grandfather who had come here from New England — of the grandmother who had faced the Indians so bravely out on the farm — of the young uncle who was killed in the Civil War, and whose resting-place was marked by a drooping, faded flag. All the family history gained point so rehearsed here above the dust of its actors. The children felt the happiness of the day touched by something which gave it an unearthly charm.

Many deeds of kindness, too, were done — to the absent; and unobtrusive sympathy was offered to the recently bereaved, whose garb of black set them apart.

When the luncheons had been eaten with hearty appetites and the work was over, in the waning afternoon baskets were repacked and the workers at last strolled about surveying their neighbours' plots and comparing notes.

Certain corners of the graveyard drew unfailing interest. One was the grave of the unknown stranger. Lovers gazed upon the small black cross without a name, and drawing closer together felt a gentle melancholy steal across the sentiment of the moment

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as they recalled the story as they had heard it from their elders. Hand sought hand as they turned away. How sad to be old and alone — how good to be young and together.

The old Vanderveld enclosure, too, had its interest. The high, wrought-iron fence with the locked gate which shut in the old tombstones spoke of a world apart from and above any known to the villagers.

As the children peered through the bars, trying to decipher, under the tangle of rose, bramble, and creeper, the names on the slanting tombstones, Cornelius Vanderveld — and there — Sophia — the elders had a word of reminiscence. "Sophia, that's old Miss Vanderveld — I remember her when I was a child. She lived in what's now Mis' Beebe's house — a little lady, but very proud — with white hair and black eyes. Land sakes, that was long ago! She was the last of 'em. Guess she'd rather be buried under creepers than be tidied up by the likes of us." And they would move comfortably on, to pause next before the Erskine plot, where a plain, central monument, covered with names and dates and surrounded by rows of headstones told the story of those generations of the same name, who had lived quietly and died honoured. There was nothing here eccentric enough to draw much comment, but the adjacent lot, where pensioners and more distant relatives were laid, held matter for endless discussion.

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"The Erskines' plot always looks neat," Maria said, tipping her nose over the iron railing. "Nothin' showy about it, but real nice and genteel."

"Looks awful cold, I think," Miss Meeks insisted. "I must say I do like flowers. See how cheerful the graveyard looks down there where they've laid out all the plots like little gardens. It does make a show, specially those tiger lilies in Mrs. Donner's enclosure. They are somethin' handsome."

Maria moved on. "Here are flowers for you," she said acidly over her shoulder; "wreath of pansies on Mr. Dimmock's grave — cross of lilies on his wife's — fresh, too."

Lillian Vincent, standing close by with David Donner, turned with her gentle smile to Maria.

"Jean must have brought them over this morning. I saw her walking back with Miss Roxina."

Maria sniffed. "The doctor takes great care of her. He thinks her too good, I s'pose, to join the picnic. Yet who were the Dimmocks, anyway? Were they such great folks?"

Lillian broke in quickly in a troubled voice. "Oh, no. That's not the reason. He's not a bit stuck-up. I think he's afraid of her hearing something."

"Much better if she did," Maria declared. "Some day she must find out that her father was killed — here."

"Oh, don't talk about it," Miss Meeks cried, with an affected little scream. "I am so nervous. I

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can't bear to hear horrors or I don't sleep for a week."

"What you talking about?" wheezed Mrs. Donner. She came up panting from her work, followed by her tall, gaunt husband, and to him Maria turned with a manner which was meant to be ingratiating.

"About Mr. Dimmock's death," she said. "You was the one who found him — were n't you, Mr. Donner?"

Miss Meeks's nerves must have taken a sudden brace, for she pressed nearer, while Lillian Vincent shrank back.

But Mr. Donner was not to be drawn. He nodded. "Yep," he said.

"Yes, father found him," his more garrulous spouse continued. "Lying just there on his face, his head towards the corner — 'n' his hat had fallen off. 'N' father found the fresh wagon marks at the gate and the ground all stamped up, and he followed the marks till they turned off to the Attica road, and there they was lost."

"What do you think had happened?" Miss Meeks had forgotten her nerves. She knew the story by heart, but wanted the thrill of hearing it again on the spot. In a country where there is no theatre, no opera, and few books, one must get what sensation one can from life.

"Plain's day," Mr. Donner pronounced judicially. "These fellers had come an' were just gittin' to

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work when the minister, nigh distracted at her death, walks in upon 'em. He goes for 'em, and they just lays him out with a spade, and runs away. That's what the coroner found at the inquest."

Miss Meeks drew a long breath. "Dear, dear, time does fly. Why, Jean is fifteen!"

"Nearly sixteen," Lillian amended.

"She has n't any looks," Maria remarked.

"She ain't pretty," Mrs. Donner agreed. "No white and pink and chany-blue. But she's got somethin' about her that makes a person look at her, and when you look once, you have to keep lookin'. She makes me think of a young saplin', she's so slim. And she's tall enough and her hair's like David's — black as —"

"Not quite black," Lillian interrupted. "It's black with a funny burnt look in the waves, almost gold. I have never seen hair like it."

Maria raised her chin and walked away, Miss Meeks reluctantly following.

Mrs. Donner chuckled good-naturedly. "Maria Beebe's just made so that praise o' any mortal creature's pizin to her peace o' mind."

"Praise of Jean especially," Lillian said. "I don't know why she dislikes her so."

"You 'n' David done sweetheartin'?" Mrs. Donner asked with a smile. "'Cause father 'n' I are tired 'n' ready to go when you two are."

Lillian blushed all over her fair face. "I am ready," she said with gentle dignity, "but I am

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walking back. We've only been talking of crops, Mrs. Donner. David is a great farmer." With a little nod of her head and a smile she had left them, before David knew that she was gone. He watched her as she crossed the graveyard.

"Come, David," his mother said sharply. "She's gone, and you'll lose her for good if you don't wake up. Father 'n' I will wait at the gate till you get the horses. Look spry."

The Donner family were the last to leave the graveyard. Already the peace of evening was enfolding it in its shadows, but the points of the hemlocks were still gold in the setting sun.

CHAPTER XX

LILLIAN walked quickly back to the village across the fields. More than the chill of the air, the pain of hurt pride hastened her feet.

Was that what all the little world of Tacitus was thinking? That, in country parlance, she and David were sweethearting? And was it true? There came the hurt. She did not know. She hoped, but she was not sure. Gentle, timid, unambitious, she had been irresistibly attracted, since the days of her very young girlhood, by the sense of force, of physical strength, which lay behind his somewhat stolid silence. He represented all the familiar life that she knew and with which she felt her future would be satisfied.

All that her mother approved in Rufus Haines, on the contrary, alarmed her. He had been pressing in his attentions now for three years, and her mother wished her to accept him. But his competence and his pushing smartness made her uneasy. Where might they not lead him? To new places, to higher positions of trust certainly — and she shrank from the new. The happiest day of her school life had been when she returned to Tacitus. Now she only asked to remain here, among old friends, old surroundings, and a round of simple duties. Possibly

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the girl had a latent sense of beauty which drew her to the quiet spaces of the country, to the patriarchal dignity of farm life, rather than to the crowds, the meretricious adornments, the cramped houses of life in towns.

Yet she liked Rufus, too. He was a manly young fellow, kind and full of spirit. She liked his fun and enjoyed being with him. If it had not been for David, as her mother said, perhaps she could have been quite happy with him.

To-night she felt overwrought and harried. Her mother had, of late, brought a continual small pressure to bear upon her, urging her own views, now logically, now gently and wistfully.

"What more could we wish for, Lillian?" she had said. "No bad habits, smart, good-looking, and with a profession. He can give you a good position. And yet you think of throwing yourself away, of wasting all the advantages that I've given you, on a farmer! David Donner is all right as far as he goes, but he is n't good enough for you."

Returning to-night, under the spell of the big fellow's presence, Lillian told herself that her mother was wrong; that her small advantages were not wasted on him; that if he loved her at all, he loved all in her that he had not. She could imagine that he might have a deep pride in the little exterior graces which distinguished her from the village girls, and in the superior education which was their source. She told herself that all she had was not

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much and would certainly not be thrown away, provided that he gave her the right to bestow it.

But, as her mother put it, had she a right to refuse a tangible good for an imagined best? To refuse a security for uncertainty? Above all, she asked herself, had not her mother the right to demand her obedience now in return for the years of self-denial and sacrifice invested in her? With faith that the difficult thing is always the right, Lillian almost believed that it was her duty to obey her mother now, in this. Yet if only David would speak, that might give her courage. But even in the thought was a fear of that moment when he should. If he ever wanted her, he would want her so much — big, quiet David. She hung her head, her cheeks hot. How could she marry Rufus Haines, feeling like that? And yet, when she thought of him, sometimes, she felt she could be quite happy.

Now she was going back to her mother's gentle, reproachful eyes. It was very difficult. If only there was some one outside it all to give her advice. Her path had joined the road and she was walking into the village. She was nearing the parsonage. Suppose she were to go in and put the case before Miss Savage? Miss Savage had been kind to her, had lent her books and music, and had shown an interest in her. Miss Savage always seemed strong and calm — a woman of judgement. Lillian's head and her heart were in a tumult. She felt she must decide once and for ever to-night.

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She turned in at the parsonage, and almost before she knew it, had entered the white-and-green sitting-room, and was face to face with Constance.

"Why, Lillian, how tired you look!" Constance exclaimed. "Where have you come from? Were you at the picnic? No wonder you are tired. Sit down in that chair by the fire. One minute." She disappeared.

"I have ordered tea," she said, as she returned. "It will do you good." She looked kindly at Lillian, who was trying to keep her self-command. "What is it?" she asked gently.

"Oh, Miss Savage," the girl answered, the tears rising in her eyes, "I am so unhappy and I don't know what to do, and I have come to ask your advice, but I don't know how to put it. You have been so kind to me that I thought, perhaps, you would n't mind."

Constance sat down. She was happy that some one needed her, for she had felt a real discouragement that very afternoon, thinking over her drive with Jean of the day before. She reached a silk bag from the table and drew out a piece of soft coloured knitting before she answered. Then, the needles in her hands, and her eyes on the work, she said in a quiet voice, "I'm glad that you've come, and of course I will advise you as well as I can. I wonder if I can guess what it is about?"

"Perhaps," Lillian said.

"About —"

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"What I ought to do" — it all came in a rush — "I don't know. Mother has done a great deal for me. You know how much, Miss Savage, and I want to repay her if I can. And she wants me very, very much to marry some one. I like him, and if there was not any one else, I think I could marry him. But there is some one else — " She paused.

"Well," Constance said, surprised. "What question can there be, then?"

"I don't know, you see, whether he, the other, cares a bit for me."

Constance rested her knitting on her knee. "Does that change it?" she said.

"Not for me," Lillian said quickly. "But have I the right to disappoint mother so? To refuse comfort and all that for an uncertainty. You see, it is n't as if there was anything against him, or as if I did n't like him."

"What do you want to do?"

"Just go on as I am. I'd much rather stay poor and pinch and scrape with the hope—" She stopped.

"I know." Constance Savage rested her elbow on the table and her head on her hand, and there was silence while the maid brought in and arranged the tea-tray. "I know," Constance repeated, pouring the tea. "Many women have felt as you feel, Lillian, and have died, the hope turned to a might-have-been, and yet known that it was well done. That to have missed the greatest in this life, and yet to have kept it in their hearts, was better than

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to have taken a second-best." She passed the cup of tea, her own face white, but her hands steady. "Yet there is the other side. Even a second-best marriage must bring much happiness. To feel one's self needed is the supreme joy to a woman. Then — children —" Her voice deepened and softened indescribably. "Well, I often think of what a shop-girl in my girls' club in Boston said to me. She was a splendid creature, all goodness and generosity, but with the contempt for men which a girl in her position sometimes has. She said one day to me, 'I won't marry, but I'd almost stand the shame to have a kid o' me own without.' Children mean so much to most of us. I dare say your mother thinks of all that. No one can decide for you, Lillian."

Lillian's miserable face looked back at her. "I know," she said. "And I owe mother so much."

"I don't agree with you there." Constance's voice was gentle. "Don't misunderstand me. Your mother has been very fine in her devotion, but she has only fulfilled her duty to you. Don't you see? She was responsible for your life, having given you birth, and as far as she could, she was bound to help you on your way. But that you owe her anything for that, I *can't* agree. She has made you love her, because she was kind and good and unselfish. That love is her reward. But no child owes any mother more than love. Your decision must not be influenced by that."

"Oh, Miss Savage!" Lillian's voice was doubtful.

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Constance smiled across at her. "I mean it. The twisting of the Ten Commandments is responsible for a great deal of needless pain. This little tangle of yours among others." She paused. "Do you know what I should do?" She leaned forward. "I would wait for the other."

The colour rushed over Lillian's face as she rose, the awkwardness of the village girl in her movements. "Thank you," she said uncertainly.

Perhaps she had half-expected Miss Savage to side with her mother to overweigh her own will. She had certainly never thought that Miss Savage could speak like that.

Constance understood, and with her quick readjustment to another's point of view felt only sympathy for Lillian's bewilderment.

Lillian moved towards the door which was opened at that moment by the maid who announced John Erskine.

"Well?" John Erskine interrogated, smiling, when they were alone. "What have you been giving this time?"

Constance shook her head. "What she thinks is bad advice. I am not sure that she does n't think me a rather wicked woman — a wolf in sheep's clothing." She sighed impatiently. "It seems to me that if you step out of the beaten track you are suspect. And yet it seems a duty not to continue to repeat the old platitudes, to preach the old nonsense. Who, Dr. Erskine, who thinks at all, can be-

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lieve that the child owes any return to the parents for the gift of life and such food and clothes and education as they can afford? In giving these things the parents fulfil their solemn duty. The child's duty ends with love. There is no further obligation from child to parent. Indeed, there's not. And it is the selfish expediency of the parents who have taught it, and the church, bought by the parents' money, which has inculcated it. Now the whole thing is twisted about."

"But suppose the child is economically dependent on the parent?"

"That's the parent's fault, and the child should not suffer for it. Every child should be taught to be self-supporting and so to win his own soul. And do you know" — she bent towards him eagerly — "Mr. Owen Owens said something to me last week which I have often thought myself. He came to bring me some roots for autumn planting. And he said that happiness lies in the possession of three things — a religion, a craft, and a hobby."

John smiled. "He has his happiness safe enough, then. Though it is difficult to tell in his case, which are the craft, and which are the hobbies!"

"Of course, that's the way it ought to be! It would be so in a community where every man took pride and pleasure, like Mr. Owen Owens, in his craft. Oh, I am sure that it will all work out beautifully to that some day. But, meanwhile, we have the spectacle of weak little girls sacrificing their

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chances of happiness and of happy children to their parents through a mistaken idea of gratitude for food and clothes — or, it may be, for French frocks and trips abroad. It is curious. The girls and boys are so self-sacrificing and the parents think how well they've brought them up!"

"I shall never be troubled in that way by Jean," John said drily. "She has her own ideas on every subject and, what's more, acts on them."

"Yes," Constance said slowly. "Do you know that I feel that I have taught her all that I can? In justice to her, she should have another teacher."

John protested. "There is no one in Attica who is as strong as you are, Miss Savage."

"I was not thinking of Attica. But of Boston — Paris — Munich —"

John did not answer. A swift dismay kept him silent.

"I think that with study under good masters, she might become an exceptional musician. She began late and requires tremendous drill to acquire a better technique. But she has the ear and the temperament of the artist. She ought to go away."

John Erskine rose. He was conscious of an effort to appear unconcerned. "I dare say you're right," he said.

CHAPTER XXI

"I HAVE N'T heard you play for a long time." John Erskine spoke abruptly, looking up from his desk where he bent above the growing manuscript of his new book.

Jean smiled from the corner of the settle where she was reading. She had on a new, soft, cream-coloured dress, cut out a little in the neck, that had just come from Boston, and which matched the warm white of her cheek.

"I thought you were deep in it," she said, nodding to his desk, "or I would have spoken. See." She held up her German grammar. "It is n't easy to play for you, is it? You are out all day and when you come in you are always here, and the piano is upstairs."

John Erskine did not answer. A sudden realisation of her beauty had come to him with a shock.

She grew slowly crimson under his scrutiny. "Is it" — she paused — "my new dress? Don't you like it? Mrs. Gray sent it. It's more grown-up than any others I have had."

"Ah, that's it," he said. "I was forgetting my manners. Of course, it's the dress. But about your playing. I should like to hear you sometimes. Why should n't we have the piano down here? Or, better

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still, Jean, I will give you another. How about a grand, a small grand?"

The book slipped from her lap. "Oh, J.E., not really? And I have been so longing for one! Oh! J.E., how splendid!" Her face was vivid. "How can I ever thank you?"

John Erskine rose and walked to the other side of the room.

"It's nothing," he said curtly, turning back. "It pleases me. But you should tell me when you want anything. Tell me frankly. It is most annoying for me to feel that you don't."

"But I do," she protested. "But a grand piano is such a big thing and the old one is quite good."

"We must ask Cousin Roxina down here in the evenings."

"Oh, must we? She's really quite happy upstairs, dozing and playing patience. We bore her to death, you know we do."

"Perhaps." He sat down at the desk. "Well, bring me your work. Let's see what geometry and German will do."

"Do?" she asked, bringing the books, but he did not answer. "I hope," she went on, as she laid them on the table, "that you won't be called out to-night. You've had to go so often this winter. You are too good. I think the people impose on you."

"Nonsense."

Surprised at his tone, she came and stood behind

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him, while he went through her papers, correcting and explaining.

"You have done this translation very well." He tapped the German paper with his pencil. "Six months in Paris and six in Germany would make you fluent in conversation, too. It is not an impossibility. I can't expect to keep you buried here, can I?" He asked the question sharply.

"Oh, but I like staying," she answered.

"Humph!"

"I do," she repeated. "You are not very polite, J.E."

"Ah, yes, but you don't know the world. You will want to see it, to explore — to go to Boston — to New York — London — Paris — Berlin? And Italy? Does n't that fire you?"

Something in his tone puzzled her. But she answered simply. "Yes. It is wonderful, but I know it as well as if I had seen it, somehow. And I don't want to go — yet."

He laughed. "Not quite yet. Next year, perhaps. How can you know it all, child?"

"I don't know, but I do. It is not seeing things that interests me. It is doing things, feeling things. I want to feel everything, yes, *everything* that can be felt! Places are for later when I shall need to be amused, when I am old, twenty-five or thirty."

"Twenty-five or thirty!" his voice was mocking. He laughed shortly.

Hurt at his tone, she turned away. She hated to

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be so young, so silly — only a child, a baby, to him. It was maddening.

John Erskine had forgotten her. Sitting with her books before him, he had gone back to the day of his meeting with Robert and Mary Dimmock. He had felt no premonition of the future as he clasped their hands. Eight years ago. He had come back to do his duty in the place where he was born. How had he done it?

“Shall I go?” Jean’s voice recalled him.

He answered with an effort. “Is it time? What was it we were talking about? Oh, yes. Well, months ago and again yesterday Miss Savage spoke to me about your music. She tells me that she can’t do any more for you. That she thinks you should have better masters.”

Jean shook her head. “It is n’t so,” she said gravely. “I love music, but I don’t care to play as most people do. I don’t want to learn things to play. I want to make my own music. Or — or — play what I hear.”

“That’s just it! You ought to hear good music — concert — opera — ” He turned his chair to face her.

Again she shook her head a trifle impatiently. “Not that, — I don’t mean that. That’s like the places, for when I am old — older, I mean — But now, for a long time, I want just to make my own music. I hear it — oh, everywhere — ” She spoke diffidently. “It is like the belief I used to have about

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things feeling. The whole world seems alive, full of voices in rhythm." She looked at him tentatively. "You don't think it silly?"

"Not in the least."

She waved a slim, comprehensive hand. "It is all living," she said. "I am terribly afraid of losing the feeling. I might if I went to cities, might n't I?"

"I don't know. Originality is a great thing, but you won't be able to make your music, as you say, without studying. No, I agree with Miss Savage."

"Oh, Miss Savage!" she interpolated pettishly.

"She says that you ought to study seriously, have greater advantages — go away."

"Go away! What right has she to talk about me?" Her voice was quivering, her eyes blazing.

"My dear — Miss Savage —"

"Miss Savage! Miss Savage! It's always Miss Savage! I wish I had never seen her. What right has she to talk about me behind my back?" She sprang to her feet, turning a tense, white face on John. "I hate Miss Savage — I hate her." With a sob she turned and fled from the room.

John Erskine, annoyed and disturbed, rose and paced the room. What had happened? What had moved her? Was she tired? Overstrained? Had he been working her too hard? That must be it. She had lost control of herself completely. He sat down again and lit his pipe before he took up his pen. He could not bear to think of her outburst. He would not. He put the scene out of his mind.

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Jean reached her room, calm with excitement, but in a moment this gave way and she found herself trembling. Shaking, she threw herself on her bed and burst into wild tears. She was utterly ashamed, bowed down, and humiliated. With clenched hands she lay sobbing in the dark. What had made her behave so outrageously? She had not known that she could till that moment's fury had swept her away. It was unforgivable. What must he think of her? She could not bear the idea of facing him again. What madness in her blood had surged up, betraying to him what she had not acknowledged to herself to exist. What that was, she would not even think. But suppose he told Constance Savage! They were great friends. The thought made her bite her handkerchief in an agony. She could not bear that. She could never face them again if he did. She sat up on the edge of her bed. She was not sorry for a word she had said now. She said them over in the dark — "I hate her — I hate her — I hate her," and calmed herself so doing. She told herself she could not help the fact. She did hate Constance Savage, but the dreadful thing was that he should know that she did, and worse, that he should tell.

The unbearable shame of this thought brought her to her feet. She opened the door and ran down the stairs to the study again, opened the door and went in.

John Erskine sat working at the desk, and Jean,

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absorbed in her trouble, was unconscious of her wild, tear-stained face in its tumbled masses of black hair.

"I came back," she said defiantly, standing still before him. "I am not sorry a bit for what I said. I can't help it. As long as I've said it, I won't back out. I don't like her. But" — she paused, swallowing her pride — "you won't tell her, will you?"

"Tell her!" John repeated sharply. "My dear child, what do you take me for?"

"Oh, I don't know," she cried. "I am sorry. Good-night, and forgive me, please."

For the second time she was gone, leaving John this time so disturbed that work was impossible for the rest of that night.

CHAPTER XXII

THE morning brought reflection and repentance to Jean. While she dressed, she recalled all Constance's kindness to her, all that she owed to Constance. She told herself that it was her own fault if she did not like Constance, for Constance was at all points her own superior. Going to the other extreme she rehearsed Miss Savage's perfections. "She is tall and stately," she admonished herself in the glass, "while you are only five feet five, and that's not tall enough, if it is the height of the Greek slave that Cousin Roxina is always talking about. What Greek slave? I must ask J.E. And she has white hands, not paws, and brown eyes, not green, — and soft brown hair, — and she's good and gentle and gracious — and superior — and, after all, I don't like her as much as I thought I did!" At which she had the good sense to laugh and so brace herself to go down to breakfast, where she talked a great deal to hide from John Erskine that she was conscious of last night's betrayal. And when he had left, feeling a need of expiation, she volunteered to walk to old Miss Lovejoy's to fetch some honey for Cousin Roxina, although she particularly disliked going there.

It was the end of March. The frost coming out of the ground had left roads and gardens deep in

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mud. Snow still lingered in dingy patches in fence corners, but the tree-tops looked red against the sky, and surest sign of spring, all down Upper Street buckets were hung on taps driven into the maple trees to catch the trickle of crystal maple sap that had begun to run.

Owen Owens tapped these trees, and Jean as she went on her way found him peering into a bucket. She stopped.

"Oh, Mr. Owens. You won't forget to tell me before you make the maple sugar, will you?"

The preacher lifted his head and saluted her, with an indefinite wave of his hand. "Jean — never have since you were a little maid. It won't be much this year. Sap don't seem to be rising much."

"Oh, but it's got to," Jean declared airily. "Sooner or later."

He shook his head, with a quaint decisiveness. "There's no rule," he said, rolling his r's, "for tr-rees and such. Don't you know that, little maid who knows so much? No rules for tr-rees and such. They ar-re no more alike than you and me! There ar-re some good and some bad and some ugly — and some handsome — and they know it."

"Oh, yes," Jean agreed with enthusiasm; "Of course they do." They turned and walked on together. They were great friends.

Owen Owens delighted in giving rein to his simple whimsical fancies with the girl who always understood. Now his thin-lipped wide mouth twitched

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as he went on in his rich voice. "Do you know the proudest tree in all the country? It is that tall mountain-ash tree in the fall, on the top of Mount Eliza yonder. Have you ever noticed her, Jean? Near daft with pr-ride — pr-ride that deceiveth. Where are you going?"

"For honey."

"Aye," the preacher continued, "who shall say that these tr-rees and flowers of the field and the whole gr-reat creation is not a living creature same as you and me? What is to hinder? Who shall gain-say?"

"No one," Jean agreed, her eyes bright. He paused to peer into another bucket, talking over his shoulder.

"A gr-reat student once told to me — 't was before your father came here, years ago. He was a young fellow just from college with a deal of knowledge out of books, and we had many a talk together over this and that. 'Ah,' said he to me one day, 'you've got great men on your side, Owens.'" The preacher straightened himself and faced Jean. "'T was Vir-rgil who said, 'First the sky and the earth and the watery plains and the moon's bright sphere and Titan's star, a speerit heeds within — and a wind instilled through the limbs gives energy to the whole mass and mingles with the mighty body. Thence springs the race of men and beasts and the lines of winged fowl and the monsters Ocean bears beneath his marble floor.'" He declaimed the words

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with a grand roll which gave them colour and consequence.

"Oh, I like it," Jean cried. "How did you remember it?"

"He wr-rote it down and then I learned it. And he said," the preacher continued weightily, "that a German writer — Goethe — I have read him since in the translations — had written of the spirit in the earth. Though it is not surprising to me that others have thought the same as me."

"Mr. Owens, is that you?" 'T was Maria Beebe's sharp voice from her garden.

Owens made a wry face and Jean laughed. "I'd rather be a tree than some people," she whispered, and, with a nod, swung across the square on her errand.

"Who was that you were talking to?" Maria asked, meeting him at the gate.

"Miss Jean Dimmock," Owens answered precisely.

" 'We talked with open heart an' tongue,
Affectionate and true.
A pair of friends, though she was young
And I was — fifty-two — '

as the poet saith."

"Oh, Jean Dimmock."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated with a twinkle, "Miss Jean Dimmock."

Mrs. Beebe turned sharply and walked into the house.

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Jean went smiling on her way. Owen Owens's words had set fire to her inflammable fancy. She thought of the "Ocean's marble floor" and of the proud tree up on Mount Eliza, then of the eerie little birch wood on the edge of the sand-dunes. She would ride out there soon and she would go again on a summer night and watch and listen and —

"Well, Jean, dear. You nearly ran into me! Where are you going to on a March morning with your eyes full of dreams?"

"Oh, Miss Savage!" She looked at Constance with frank, smiling face, and Constance recognised this as the Jean John Erskine knew. Was she, too, to know her after so long? Or would the usual curious veil of antipathy, of indifferent hostility, fall again between them?

But when Jean made amends to herself they were thorough. And for the few moments that she stood talking to Constance, she was as charming as she could be. As they were parting, Constance turned back to her.

"My nephew is coming for Easter. I hope that you will help me entertain him. He is a nice boy — at Harvard."

Jean suddenly coloured vividly. "Thank you," she said formally. "I am afraid that there is not much that I can do."

"Only look as lovely as you do this morning," Constance answered mentally. "She is lovely,"

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she thought, as she went on across the square. At the big, round, green watering-trough she stopped and drew out the bread which she brought every day for the trout that lived here. She leaned against the edge, throwing crumbs of it into the water and watching the fish as they darted from side to side, eagerly sucking in the bits.

"So you play Providence to the fish as well as to the birds of the air, Tacitus, and all the inhabitants thereof."

Constance turned smiling to John. "How happy every one seems to be this morning. I have just met Jean, as gay as a lark. And, oh, Dr. Erskine, she is lovely! I am expecting a boy, a nephew of mine, for Easter, and I foresee that she will make short work of his heart. Don't you think that she is quite lovely?"

"At times," John answered grudgingly, "quite. But she is very changeable."

"That's part of the charm," Constance insisted. "If Marian brings her out, she ought to make a sensation. Marian's girls are nice and well-bred, but not beauties."

"I have n't seen them for years. Marian continues to invite us there. But I am too busy. She forgets that she might come here to us. There is plenty of room in the house."

"Yes, but a woman like Marian — clever and worldly — has every moment planned for. Between her interest in Society and Art and Science and

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Literature — all with capitals — she really has no time to enjoy anything! But she is a dear, in spite of it, and devoted to you, as you know.”

“Yes, we were always fond of one another. Your gluttons seem satisfied and your rations are exhausted. You’re going home? I’m going across the bridge.”

“You’ll meet Jean. She’s just gone that way.”

She turned, walking with her long, clean step and went on to the parsonage. Had she looked she would have seen that Dr. Erskine did not go down the street that led over the bridge. He changed his mind.

Constance entered the house, thoughtful. She was glad to have heard his voice and to have seen his face. But she knew that she had made a mistake when she had included him among the happy. John Erskine, she felt, was not a happy man. And yet he had not an unhappy nature, she was sure of that. Whatever his trouble, it came from some cause which he could not remedy, which he was bound to accept, which he could not change. What could it be? As more than once before, her mind involuntarily flew to that Mary Dimmock who had lived before her in the parsonage, whose personality she sometimes felt still lingered there, the woman of whose quiet beauty and whose gentle charm she had heard, the woman of whom John Erskine had never spoken, yet for whose life he had fought — the woman whose child he had taken into his

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house. Could that woman have taken John's happiness with her to the grave? and left him with a weight of sorrow and — could it be remorse, which had made a stern, taciturn man of him at thirty-five?

As she entered her sitting-room she realised the whole significance of her thoughts and faced them. It could not be. She wronged him and the woman she had never seen, the woman who was dead. Knowing John Erskine, she knew there could have been no wrong. But might he not have loved her? She stood looking around the room which had been Mary's, which she had made here. She wished that it could speak.

The door opened and her father came in. He appeared rather more robust after the winter of care and feeding up. His mild blue eyes looked enquiringly over his thin nose as usual. He held a book in his hand.

"I thought I heard you come in, my dear. And I have brought down this book to show you a most extraordinary mistake."

"What is the book, father?"

"It is Henderson's *Vita Æschyli*, the 1820 edition — rare. I have read it several times myself without noticing this error."

She stood at his shoulder, full of sympathy as she felt him tremble, thrilled by the interest of his discovery. His forefinger pointed to the vital point in the text.

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"You see? A wrong date. Henderson says that Æschylus paid a visit to Sicily with Pindar and Simonides and was entertained by Herion, the Tyrant of Syracuse, in 477. But Herion did not come to the throne until 476!" He closed the book on his fingers, peering at her triumphantly. "An extraordinary inaccuracy, is it not?"

"Extraordinary," Constance echoed gravely. "You will be able to talk to Rex about the Greek dramatists, father. He is coming for Easter, you know."

Mr. Savage waved a deprecating hand. "I fear that my grandson is not much of a scholar, my dear. You, I find, while no classical scholar, are always intelligently interested. It seems a pity to me at times that your mother did not allow you to study Greek. But she had her own ideas on the subject" — he was approaching the door — "and I dare say" — the door was open — "very — " The door closed on the sentence and Constance was left alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

“DON’ know’s I ever have known such goings on.”

Maria Beebe was under way for a good afternoon’s gossip. She and Miss Meeks, who had come in to do some sewing, were seated together in the bay-window of the Beebe’s sitting-room. Miss Meeks, as was proper for one who worked for two shillings per day, was bolt upright in a straight cane chair, but Maria was rocking comfortably as she talked. Her frizzled hair was greyer, her sharp eyes a trifle harder with every year. Now the colour of battle had risen to her high cheek-bones. Her knotty fingers were busy with Attica’s latest fashion in crocheted mats, whose greatest point was, of course, a fancied resemblance to a blue water-lily. To prefer that a mat should not look like a mat — to find a decided leaning toward anything that “looks like something that it is not” — was a peculiarity of taste not confined to Attica.

Had Maria Beebe but known it, her own chief fault lay in that very thing. She might have passed for a fair sample of what she was. But she was a failure at what she was not.

She proved it now by her eagerness to pull down those whom she would not for an instant have acknowledged as set above her.

“Don’ know’s I ever have known such goings

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on," she repeated. " 'T is n't as if Jean Dimmock was a child. But she's sixteen an' a half, which is really grown. And 't is n't as if she were a plain girl, for she has a kind of good looks which I can't see much in, but I s'pose a man can. A man, s'far's I can see, don't need much but a petticoat an' a wig to turn his head."

"An' she has got an elegant head of hair," Miss Meeks agreed.

"If you like that kind. What s'prises me is that Miss Savage should not seem to mind, though it is her own nephew. 'Course you can't expect Dr. Erskine to keep track of a harum-scarum girl, he off on his rounds as he is, nor old Miss Roxina either. I said a word to Martha the other day. You should have seen the way she glared at me."

Miss Meeks bit off her cotton. "What did she say?"

Maria bent over her work. She had no intention of repeating Martha's words. "Oh, you know the way she always talks. Dr. Erskine might be the King of England an' Jean a royal Princess. Loony old woman."

"Say, have you ever et any of her parken?" Miss Meeks was animated. "It's the finest gingerbread I ever tasted. I had some one day when I was there sewing."

"Where'd you have tea — in the kitchen?" Maria demanded sharply.

Miss Meeks was superior for once. "Certainly

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not. On a tray in the sewing-room. They always know how to treat you in a really good house, I find. When I used to sew for the judge's wife in Attica, I had things real comfortable, meals an' all laid regular on the sewing-room table an' an hour at midday for a walk."

"Humph!" Maria sniffed.

"An' when I left," continued Miss Meeks, not to be cheated of a little sweet revenge, "she made me a present of a real good dress — much better'n that one you're going to turn an' make over."

Before Maria could think of a sufficiently crushing reply, the clatter of galloping hoofs, coming nearer down the street, brought her to her feet.

"For mercy's sake, the third time!" she exclaimed. She craned over Miss Meeks's shoulder and they both stared out above the geraniums in the window.

"It's them again! An' she's ahead this time," Miss Meeks cried. "She does look nice on horseback. An' he's a handsome young feller!" She could not repress a sigh as the two figures, the girl and the man, swept by out of sight.

"Well, I'm glad you think that's lookin' nice — I don't," Maria exclaimed sternly. "An' what about the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals?"

"Oh, I don't think that," Miss Meeks said primly. Since she had been to sew for Miss Roxina she had shown signs of insubordination to the Beebe rule.

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"Dr. Erskine has trained Jean Dimmock. I guess there ain't much you can tell her about horses."

Maria knew when to be subdued. "I wonder where they're goin'," she said.

Jean and Rex Challoner were going where the wild mood took them. Jean, secure in the admiring friendliness of all the village, and Rex content to follow her. It was the last afternoon of a glorious holiday and they were making the most of it. They swept round the green trough in the middle of the square, down the street, and clattered over the bridge, where Jean, with a turn of her wrist, brought her horse around to the left, Rex close beside her. The horses dropped into a trot.

"I say, this is fun!" the young fellow declared.

"Is n't it?" Jean cried.

As the horses slowed to a walk, she dropped the bridle and raised her arms to tighten the black ribbon which held the mass of hair under the little soft black hat.

"It's lucky my hair is n't put up yet. It will be a nuisance when it is."

"Rather a shame, too, for other reasons," Rex laughed, looking at the loop of heavy braid on her shoulders.

"Don't be silly," she admonished severely. "Do you see the gate ahead? We will tie the horses there. That's Mount Eliza."

"And we climb her and sit down and talk?"

"A few minutes," Jean granted. "But we must

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not stay long. I have a lot of things to do at home before I dress to go to your aunt's to supper."

"May I walk home with you after supper?"

Jean turned to him quickly, blushing at the tone. "Oh, I don't think so. J.E. is sure to send some one or come for me himself," she said simply.

"I don't wonder. I should myself, if I were he."

Jean touched her horse, flew ahead to the gate, and before Rex reached her, had swung herself to the ground.

"You might have waited for me to help you, you know!" he said, as he flung himself off his horse and took her bridle from her. "Come, you must not be so obstinate. You can't have your own way always!"

"But why not?" she demurred. "I am used to doing everything alone. I never have any one to ride with, and I go everywhere."

"You ought n't, you know." The boy looked concerned. "I don't think it's safe. I don't think that guardian of yours is half careful enough, really."

Jean laughed gaily, leading the way up the steep hill. It was amusing.

"No, but really, you know. You're awfully young."

She turned a vivid mocking face to him.

"I have done it for ages."

"Well, I don't mean only young" — his eyes were full of her beauty — "but you're too — oh, dash it! — too pretty, you know."

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"Am I?" She stared at him, surprised. "How funny! Am I?"

Her question was so genuinely full of naïve enquiry that he answered quite sincerely.

"Of course. Do you mean to say you don't know it?"

The colour came and went in her face. "I suppose it sounds silly," she said, as they reached the top, "but I was n't sure."

"Well, you may be," he said concisely, "sure."

They sat down at the top of the cone-shaped hill, unmindful of the view spread out before them, the village and the creek marking the winding valley. Jean had forgotten the proud ash tree which waved its fresh young green above her head in vain appeal. To know that you were pretty was more wonderful than these — than view or trees.

She sat with her arms about her knees, holding her whip, while Rex, who had thrown his long length at her side, studied her profile, the curve of her cheek, and the mass of dusky hair.

He was good to look at himself, young and strong, and well turned out.

"Don't stare," she said finally.

"Can't help it."

"Then your education has been deficient. I was taught that in my very early youth."

"So was I, but there are exceptions to every rule."

"How many times have you said that?" Her chin went up a trifle.

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"Never before, I swear." He raised himself eagerly on his elbow.

She turned quickly and gave him one long glance of her great black-lashed eyes. In that moment she made a further discovery of unimagined power which made it difficult to withdraw her eyes from those others that held them or to still the beating of her heart.

Frightened, she sprang to her feet. "Oh, we must go. I shall be late."

"So soon?" He rose reluctantly. "You are unkind — Jean."

She threw back her head and laughed. The sense of power was pleasant. For the first time in her life she did not run down the slope of Mount Eliza.

"I shan't see you alone again, I suppose." Rex's voice was discontented. "You need n't be in such a hurry."

"We have n't any such fearful secrets to discuss, have we?" she asked, a trifle scornfully.

"No secrets, but I have lots of things to say" — he paused — "and you might have waited to hear them. It won't do any good not to listen, for I shall come back in the summer and say them. May I?" He was close to her as they reached the gate. His hand closed over hers as she fumbled with her horse's bridle.

But she would not have that.

"Don't," she said angrily. "I shall hate you if you do."

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He released her hand at once.

"Oh, no, you won't, Jean."

They both mounted and rode off in silence. When they entered the stone gates of the old house, Rex spoke with an effort.

"Forgive me if I have offended you. I am sorry."

Jean turned a sweet face to him.

"Oh, let's be friends again," she said, "because you're going to-morrow."

"And you'll be sorry a little?" He leaned nearer.

"Yes."

"Then let this be good-bye till I come again. We can't half say it at the house to-night."

"Good-bye," Jean said, very low. "Now, will you go, please. I am going round to the stable."

He turned his horse and rode away down the avenue.

CHAPTER XXIV

SINCE Jean's outburst there had been no more evenings in the study. The next night the doctor had appeared in Cousin Roxina's sitting-room. He came, he said, because he wished to hear Jean play. For several following nights some apparently natural excuse had risen for his absence from the study, till the custom had lapsed.

Jean did not know whether he was going on with his book alone or not. She felt that something was wrong, but she did not know what. She was afraid that it was her own behaviour on that night, yet he had seemed to forgive her. At Miss Savage's request lessons had been stopped during the holidays while Rex was there, and every day had been full of fun, of rides and walks and tea-parties at the parsonage, so Jean had not missed the old pleasant hours.

But now that Rex was gone, time dragged. John had said nothing about resuming their work together, and the girl felt hurt and unhappy.

She was glad of the diversion caused by the arrival of three large boxes from Boston which came by the afternoon post, and which were carried up to Cousin Roxina's sitting-room.

"Surely, Cousin Roxina," she exclaimed, from amidst a cloud of tissue paper, "Mrs. Gray has sent

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me too many things this summer. What shall I ever do with three great boxes full of clothes? Oh, Cousin Roxina, is n't this lovely?" She rose, flushed and smiling, shaking the papers from the folds of a soft white dress.

"See, the waistband — French — Oh! it is pretty! I can hardly wait to try it on. I have happened on the nicest box first, I think. But, Cousin Roxina, really, it is too many, is n't it?"

"I don't know, Jean. It seems to me Cousin Marian must know. I b'lieve Cousin John wrote to her to send you just the very same outfit this summer that she got for her own youngest girl. And you may depend she did as he said. People always do as John says. What's coming next?"

"Pink. Pale pink. It's tied across with tapes to hold it. See!" She held it up. "Oh, it's really quite low in the neck and with sleeves above the elbow. I'll never have a chance to wear that. But is n't it too pretty almost to wear! It's much the prettiest dress she has ever sent." She threw the dress across the chair. "It will be fun trying them on! And, oh, Cousin Roxina, here's a white silk case — Pearls, Cousin Roxina, and a note."

She read it aloud: "This little string of pearls is to mark your almost-growing-up, dear Jean, and I send them with the hope that I may before long see you with them around your neck. We have just been hearing about you from my son's friend, Rex Challoner. This summer we are determined not

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to take a refusal. We all want a visit from you, with or without your stern guardian. Don't disappoint us. The girls join me in love to you. Hope you will like the frocks. Hats are harder to choose, but I think I have done fairly well."

Jean looked up. "I don't want to go," she said quickly; then, turning impulsively, she knelt down by the old lady's chair. "Oh, Cousin Roxina, dear, don't let me go!"

Miss Adams laid her hands on the girl's head kindly. "You need n't be afraid, Jean," she said reassuringly. "They're not at all grand, though they do live in a house with thirty bedrooms, a bathroom to every two. They're very kind!"

"Kind!" Jean started up. "Good gracious!" She turned back to the boxes, her chin in the air.

While she unpacked the rest of the dainty outfit, Cousin Roxina went on eulogising upon her favourite topic: —

"And to think, Jean, that Mrs. Gray knows that young man who was here at Easter. The world is small, my dear. He seemed a nice young man, though rather free in his manners. That's the fashion now, I suppose. I wonder why the doctor did not like him."

"Did n't he?" Jean was busy trying on a wide straw hat trimmed with a wreath of blush roses.

"Not over-much, between you and me. Though I could not make out what he had against him."

"Do you like this hat, Cousin Roxina?"

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The door opened as she spoke, and she turned a startled face to John Erskine.

"Don't let me disturb you!" His voice was slightly sarcastic, and he turned his eyes away from the charming picture.

She took off the hat and returned it quietly to the box without speaking.

"I have come up to ask you, Jean, if you are ready for your lessons, or if you are going to play for the rest of the spring and summer?"

She faced him with unusual dignity. "You know you said, when I stopped at Easter, that you would tell me when to begin again, J.E., and what you wanted me to do. You have n't said anything, so I supposed that you were not ready. I have been going on by myself, though, as well as I could. Shall I bring my books to the study and show you now?"

"What?" he said ungraciously, "and leave all this?"

"You ordered it, J.E.," she said.

He turned to the door abruptly. "Yes, bring the books, then. And hurry, please, I have only half an hour."

But the half-hour lengthened into an hour and a half. Neither of them could bear the tension which had crept into their relationship, and both did their best to bring it back to the old footing.

"There!" John said, pushing the last book away. "I am late. Go back to your furbelows. They can't

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do you much harm while you have as good a grip as that upon Euclid!"

"Harm!" She paused. "I think, J.E., there are too many and that they are too nice."

"Too nice!" He spoke sharply. "It's time you had nicer, then. That's an absurd idea. If they are not too nice for my nieces, they are not too nice for you."

"Thank you," she said timidly.

He turned on her almost fiercely. "Will you never learn that there are no thanks from you to me? What I do I do from no goodness, but from a sense of what I owe you — my duty — nothing more or less. Try to remember!"

"I shall not forget." Her slight figure was tense. "Is that all, J.E.?"

The passion in his face died out. "Forgive me, Jean," he said. "I'm not myself." He paused, his hand over his eyes. "I've lived for so long under a constant strain that I feel at times that I shall go mad."

"Oh, I know," she cried eagerly, forgetting her own hurt. "You never take a rest. You work and work and carry all their troubles and their worries as well as their illnesses. You must rest, J.E. It is not right. You are quite tired out. That is what it is. You've not been a bit yourself lately. Do, for every one's sake, take a holiday."

He shook his head. "No, I'm all right." He spoke calmly. "I can't take a rest till my book is finished."

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"But that will be soon. We will work at it every night as we used to, shall we? It won't take very long."

"No, not long," he said moodily.

"Well, good-bye, J. E., if you must go out. I will put on my new pink dress and the pearls and show you to-night. Shall I?"

He shook his head. "Not to-night. Don't worry, you'll have chances enough to wear them this summer if you go to my sister's — as I wish you to do."

He glanced at her steadily from under his black brows. He saw the delicate colour rise in her cheeks.

"You don't say No to that quite as firmly as you did," he said coldly, as he turned to gather up his things.

She walked to the door. There she paused, her little head held high, her chin in the air.

"You know that I don't want to go," she said very gently. "But I must if you tell me to." And she went out.

"And I shall," John said to the empty room.

CHAPTER XXV

RUFUS HAINES had wavered for months between the desire to speak and the fear of speaking to Lillian Vincent. Any lack of self-confidence was so unusual to him that he was restless and uneasy under it. As he brushed his thick brown hair vigorously before the glass in his bedroom, he argued with himself. "Be a man and get it over. If she'll have you, she'll have you, and you'll be a happy fellow. If she turns you down, well, you will have to stand it. Anyway, any blamed thing's better than wondering if you're any good, anyway, just because a girl does n't always smile at you. You bet you're some good. And you're goin' to get there, whether she comes with you or not. Though I want her. Lord, how I want her!"

As he shook his dark blue coat and slipped into it, he thought of her, so slim and fair. Yes, and educated. Sometimes he wondered if she was not a bit above him. "Sesame and Lilies" had been followed by Emerson, and Lillian had looked severe when he laughed at some of the Concord philosopher's pet metaphors. She had even talked of Ibsen and George Meredith and had offered to lend him "Hedda Gabler" and "The Egoist," but he had gravely assured her that, much as it pained him

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to resist the offer, he felt that he had no time for serious reading. He had, he said, to bone for an exam and he was so tired in the intervals that he felt he could not do justice to either Ibsen or Meredith. If she had something light, to distract his mind in the pauses of arduous mental exertion —

She said she understood, though secretly disappointed, and after some thought gave him "Ships that pass in the Night" as not too frivolous. It was bound in white-and-gold. He had thrown it on his table, where it had lain unread, while he roared with laughter over the "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" loaned him by Dr. Erskine. The white book had reproached him for a month or more. He had finally settled down to it on a Sunday afternoon and had returned it to Lillian with dutiful comments, ending with a cautious enquiry, Did she like Mark Twain? No, she didn't care for humourists. It was a crushing blow. He thought of it now as he poured cologne on his handkerchief, and took a last survey of himself. It was a pity that she did n't like Mark Twain, but there was always music as a bond, though their tastes there were not identical. She did not see the beauty in his "coon songs," and inclined to music of a more serious nature. But how sweet she looked at the piano! To have her in his home would be like living in the porch of a cathedral, in the shadow of all that was fine and high. Oh, she was miles above him. He must seem of coarser clay and fibre to her.

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If she would only marry him he would try to reach her heights and stand beside her.

Thinking these quite proper thoughts he took his new straw hat, stepped out and went to meet his fate. Summer had come and the little village was blooming. Fruit trees, lilac and syringa, snowball and wistaria filled the warm air with perfume. It was a lover's night, made for wooing, and Lillian had promised to go for a stroll in the twilight.

The cottage door was open, and as he neared it she came out to him, dressed in white. She looked the very incarnation of the young fellow's dreams. Words failed him, and that meant a good deal! He took the light wrap from her arm and they walked silently up the road which, after passing the last three houses beyond Mrs. Vincent's, led them into the solitude of fields.

"It's no use. I've got to have it over." It was not so that he had imagined himself approaching the question. "I can't stand the uncertainty any longer. It's making a coward of me." He stopped.

Lillian faced him. "Oh," she cried weakly, "what do you mean?"

"Don't you know, Lillian? You must know that I love you — that I want you to be my wife." He was gazing down at her with passionate eyes. "Tell me," — he caught her hands, — "look at me and tell me — will you marry me?"

She turned her eyes from his gaze, gasping, —

"Oh, I can't, I can't."

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"Can't?" He dropped her hands. "Can't? — why not?"

As an answer she turned away, her face in her hands, crying. He watched her for a moment, then laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Look here, Lillian, do tell me the trouble. What is it?" She only shook her head, sobbing softly.

He walked along at her side. "But, don't you see, it is not fair to me. I have loved you for so long. I have n't dared to speak, because you seemed so strange. Some days I was encouraged, and other times not. I don't suppose you understand quite, but a man can't live like this. The uncertainty upsets my work. I don't want to be selfish, but I must have the question answered, once and for all."

She stopped. The note of decision in his voice was new to her. She lifted her head.

"I wish, I really wish, that I could say yes. That's been the trouble. I've wanted to, but I've known I ought not."

"Why?" His voice was crisp.

"Because," with fresh tears, "I care for some one else."

"David?" he asked tersely. "Never mind. You need n't answer if you don't want to."

"I do, though." She wiped her eyes. "It's some one who has never said anything and maybe does not care for me. That makes it harder."

"Oh, no," he said firmly; "there is no question

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if you don't love me. I would n't have a wife who did n't. Your mother wants you to, I suppose."

Lillian nodded, behind her handkerchief. He stood for a moment, his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground, then straightened himself sharply.

"Well, Lillian, we must go back," he said. "Poor girl, never mind. It's hard on us both. But you're right, I think. It's hard, though. Dash it!"

"You are not angry?" Lillian's miserable voice recalled him. "It is not my fault."

"Not a bit," he said generously. "You must n't mind if I am cut up for a while, though. It's only natural, is n't it? I won't come in. Could n't do the polite to-night. Good-bye, Lillian." His voice broke. He dropped her hand and turned away.

He walked on to the square filled with a dull pain and rebellion. He was very young still, and the bottom seemed to have fallen out of everything. He was angry with himself and filled with resentment, now that he had left her, at Lillian. Certainly she had encouraged him in her refined and educated way, he told himself. He swore blasphemously to himself.

"Well, Mr. Haines, you won't see me and you evidently intend to walk over me!"

The voice roused him. He was dimly conscious that he had been dodging some one on the sidewalk for several minutes.

"Oh, Miss Levis," he cried, apologetic at once.

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"I must have been blind, indeed." She looked very charming.

"I was only taking a little stroll. Aunt Maria will expect me back. Uncle Sam's had one of his bad attacks."

"May I walk as far as the house with you?"

She could not keep the pleased note out of her voice as she answered composedly, "Certainly, Mr. Haines, if you'd like to."

They turned and crossed the square together.

Half an hour later, as the young man returned to his rooms, assuring himself that he was crushed and his life over, he was disconcerted, not to say disappointed in himself, to find that a face with a mischievous twinkle in its eyes, framed in crinkly brown hair, persisted in mocking at the gravity of his state and the hopelessness of his future.

Annoyed, he ended by flinging himself into a chair. But as he took up a book by George Ade, he remembered with relief that Milly had once owned to him that she had read not a word of Ibsen, or George Meredith, or Ruskin, or Emerson, and that the books she liked best of all were real nice novels, awfully romantic, that ended happily. What a comfortable, bright, pretty little thing she was—like a cosy domestic kitten. He frowned as he realised the trend of his thoughts, got up, seized a photograph of Lillian, gazed upon it intently, kissed it with vehemence, and, having thus restored his self-respect, he sat down again to his book.

CHAPTER XXVI

As soon as June set him free from the not too arduous round of Cambridge term life, Rex Challoner, much to Mr. Savage's gratification and surprise, returned to the parsonage to pass a part of his vacation. He brought an echo of the world to the quiet house which, while it vaguely disturbed his grandfather, wakened in Constance an unsuspected reminiscent gaiety, through whose medium John Erskine, in his turn, was suddenly snatched back to his own youth, and compelled to view from that hill of vantage his life, as he had valiantly planned it. From that miraculously vouchsafed height of vision he fell again to the plane of achieved reality and faced the difference with an unsmiling acceptance, which became, however, as the weeks passed, shot through by an unaccustomed pain. He withdrew himself more and more from the interplay of life between the two houses in which, he told himself, he had no place, looking on with irony at the happy succession of rides and walks, of tennis and picnics, which filled the summer days. He kept to the study in the evenings, seeing before his eyes the group in the parsonage garden, or near him, on the broad verandah, under the Doric pillars. He closed the doors that he might not hear the voices.

It was to the verandah that Rex generally has-

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tened after supper to find Jean. He was coming up the steps to-night, his young figure silhouetted to her eyes against the moonlit trees.

"What a jolly night," he said, coming towards her. "Aunt Constance and Miss Manice are coming later. I say, Jean" — he paused — "the drawing-room looks ripping in this light." He drew nearer to her white figure and sat down.

Jean's hammock creaked as she swung herself. "Yes, I know — dim and white — and sweet — roses — and my new piano." She hummed to herself happily until suddenly aware of his steady gaze. "Tell me about college," she said quickly.

"Oh, I am always talking about myself. You tell me about yourself — for a change —"

"Nothing to tell."

"Oh, look here, Jean. You promised to take me out to see those sand-dunes."

She nodded. "Yes" — she paused. "I want to go" — she leaned forward — "by moonlight! I have wanted to go for ages."

He looked at her keenly, but her innocence was apparent. He hesitated for a moment, then the temptation was too much for him. "Well, let's go," he said.

"Ought we?" She had a misgiving.

"With me?" he asked. "Why not? The only thing is, we must n't tell them. Grandfather is rather crotchety. You know how old people are."

"Yes."

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"But it would be quite easy. We must wait till they're asleep and then you can meet me at the gate — is it far?"

"Oh, no!" Jean declared, carried away by the idea. "Not a bit. Three miles."

"It's settled, then. Let's go to-night." Rex had to keep the excitement out of his voice. What a lark! She was simply exquisite. He had never seen a girl so full of dash and fun, so beautiful, and yet so unconscious and young and naïve.

Jean's eyes were wide with excitement.

"All right," she cried. "Oh, here they come! Tell me quick, Rex, what time?"

"Twelve o'clock at the gate," he said, rising with her to meet the ladies.

"You look like conspirators," Constance declared. "Is Dr. Erskine —"

"J.E. will be out in a moment," Jean explained. "Mr. Haines is there about the school. They are always after him about something. Here he is now —"

John Erskine stepped into the dark porch.

"Where are you, Jean? Here's Mr. Haines, — Mr. Challoner, Mr. Haines. Good-evening, Miss Savage."

"My cousin, Miss Manice, Dr. Erskine. Isn't the moonlight marvellous?" Constance made a place for John by her side. "Jean tells me the book is nearing completion."

"Yes, nearly finished." John liked sitting by

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Constance, but he was not thinking of her. He glanced at Jean, who was talking very hard to Rex. She seemed very gay, vivacious, excited, he thought. He strained his ears to catch what she was saying. Now he heard her — “You’re too much of a materialist. I don’t believe that you will see anything or hear anything. But I shall.”

“What’s that?” Miss Manice broke in. She was a tall, dark girl of twenty-five, with prominent black eyes and a rather sleepy air, who was interested, for want of something better, in the occult.

“Mr. Challoner won’t believe that anything exists that he cannot see or hear,” Jean cried. “And I tell him that all that is best just can’t be seen or heard.”

“Oh, I say,” Rex Challoner protested, finding attention drawn to himself, “that’s gross misrepresentation. She does not mean what she says, Aunt Constance. She has no conscience. It’s very sad in one so young. I’m glad that I am not her guardian.”

“Not half as glad as I am,” Jean declared. “I would n’t change mine for anything in the world. He’s a prize guardian, are n’t you, J.E.?”

“Interested party! He’s debarred from giving evidence,” Rex protested.

“Well, Mr. Haines knows,” Jean insisted. “He’ll swear anything I like, won’t you, Mr. Haines?”

“As long as it’s to Dr. Erskine’s honour!” Mr. Haines declared with enthusiasm.

“Of course,” said Constance, laughing; “this is

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turning, like every other Tacitus assemblage, into a chorus of Dr. Erskine's perfections. It's very nice for him."

"You're wrong. You're wrong." John Erskine's voice broke in tensely. Suppose he were to rise and tell them! The temptation was strong on him. He was restless, mad. "If you knew the truth," he said shortly.

"We do." Jean's voice was audacious. "I'll *play* you what we know," she cried; and, jumping up, she disappeared with a backward glance through the French window.

"Jean playing without being asked!" Constance exclaimed to John. "Wonders will never cease."

"Wonders never do with Jean," John Erskine answered. His tone was deep, held a thrill, yet was profoundly disheartened.

A soft chord sounded from the drawing-room, then a light *arpeggio*.

"The new piano has a beautifully singing tone," Constance remarked. "She is delighted with it."

John did not answer. The little group was still.

Constance Savage listened with deep interest to the girl's improvisation. She herself would begin just so. That was the right key for John, the strong tone major. Yes, he was best expressed in chords, deep, sweet, serene, yet full of power, intense — vital. And now she agreed to the slow, bass *arpeggio* accompaniment, full and sure, throwing the austere beauty of the treble into relief. The chords were a

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statement of qualities; this was the life based on these very qualities — taking its noble course. She sat up with a shock. Something — a horrid combination of unrelated notes — had shivered the composition. It went on jangling, distorted, yet based again upon those chords, the strong *arpeggio* sobbing through the room — sobbing — sobbing — straining — Constance gripped her hands together in her lap. John Erskine had bowed his head in his hands. Mr. Haines and Miss Manice sat still, but Rex had jumped from his chair. The piano stopped still with a discord.

Rex started forward, but John Erskine sprang to his feet, and, putting the young man aside, with one step gained the drawing-room.

Jean sat at the piano. She looked at him blankly, as though dazed. "Oh, J.E.," she began uncertainly, "J.E." She put her hand to her head. "I can't think — What was it?" She caught his hand. "J.E., what was it?"

"Get up," he said firmly. "Pull yourself together."

"Oh, J.E.," — her voice was shaking, — "I can't remember."

"Don't," he said. "For God's sake, don't." His voice, though low, was peremptory.

"You're not angry?" She rose. She was white and shaking. "I wanted to play something so splendid."

"Musical hysteria!" he said shortly. He turned

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her from him towards the window, his hand on her shoulder.

"It was not," she declared, regaining her self-command. "Oh, you are hateful sometimes, J.E."

She walked to the window where she appeared — her white figure against the dim background of the room. "Did n't I do it well?" she asked, laughing. "That's the new music. You did n't know what I could do in the way of discord, did you, Miss Savage?"

But Constance rose, reproof in her voice. "I think you are over-tired. You and Rex rode too far to-day. We must all go to bed early to-night."

"Indeed, I am not tired," Jean protested hotly. "Truly, I'm not. It's such a gorgeous night. It's a shame to go to bed."

"Well, I'm tired," Rex declared lightly. "Aunt Constance is right. That was a good long ride."

Jean, astonished, began an indignant arraignment of the traitor Rex, when, catching his glance, she remembered. How stupid she was. Of course they must all get to bed early to-night. With a pretty show of yielding, she said good-night and watched the whole party, accompanied by Dr. Erskine, down the drive to the gate.

Then, filled with a new, sore resentment at her guardian, and excited by the strange experience of the evening, she went to her room to wait for the appointed hour.

CHAPTER XXVII

JEAN in her bedchamber needed no light but the moon which silvered the grey walls, deepened the blue of the hangings, lay palely on the fair white of the bed, between the dark of the twisted posts, and filled the dignified emptiness of the old room with its luminous flood.

In the middle of the floor, bathed in the moonlight the girl slowly changed her dress, slipping from the sheath of white and slowly donning a darker garment. She was thrilled with the beauty and mystery of the night, awake to the beckoning spirit of adventure which should lead her through the little wood to the confines of the sand. Rex was but a means to her end. She hardly thought of him or of any one. Now, as when she was a child, it was the elusive meaning that she hoped to grasp which enticed. It would be quite wonderful to stand in that wood in the moonlight, in the middle of the night. She had often dreamed of it.

She heard the doctor come up to bed and the old house had long settled into silence and waiting before the clock in the hall struck twelve.

Jean crept out of her room and down the stairs, where the moon shone through the high windows in long bars of pallid light. Though her heart was beating furiously, she did not make a sound as she

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stole through the hall. She hated this stealth. In spite of the excitement, the idea was unpleasant. She wished she could bang the front door. But she opened it softly and stepped out on the verandah, leaving it unlocked. She had come hatless and hurried down the avenue, wondering if Rex was waiting. He stepped out from the shadow of the gateposts to meet her.

"You are a brick. Had you any trouble?"

"Not a bit. But I am shaking all over. It's fearfully exciting."

"We are safe now," he assured her. "It's a pity we can't ride, but it's fun, anyway." He drew a cigarette from his case and lighted it. "Have you ever smoked?"

She shook her head.

"Try one now, with me."

"No."

"Why not? Do."

"No." She could not explain that it would seem to give a common touch to this coming experience.

"I thought you wanted to do everything," he teased.

"Not cheap things," she said.

"Depends on the brand," he laughed. "I believe you are afraid."

"I'm not," she flamed up.

"You are," he insisted. "You are afraid of your guardian."

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"Oh, be quiet," she cried; "I won't have you talking about him."

"I don't want to talk about him. I'd rather talk about you, Jean. You know, you do look lovely in this light. I wish you could see yourself. Really, I do."

"Well, I don't. And you promised if I came that you would not be silly."

Rex laughed.

Jean shook her head impatiently. "I ought not to be coming with you, but I have longed to come and I can't come alone and —"

"Oh, don't explain!"

"No — but you don't understand. It's not a question of you and me. It's the place — I'd have come with a boo-daddy rather than not come at all."

"Oh, well," he said, rather nettled, "I'm not proud. Though why you are so keen on the place I can't think. You are a funny girl, you know."

"Thanks. Of course anything that's not commonplace is mad — or 'funny,' as you call it. J.E. says so."

"Oh, he does, does he? A nice guardian, encouraging your queer ideas."

She laughed. "At least you do grant they are ideas! That is an admission. But don't let's fight. It's too distracting; I want to think."

They had come to the top of the hill by the station.

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"I say!" Rex exclaimed. They seemed to be standing on a divide between two lakes. For the mist rising from the creek in the valleys, both behind and in front of them, had formed seas of vapour which lay in silver sheets under the moon. It was beautiful to unearthliness, and they lingered gazing down upon it before they began to descend and were bathed in the cold damp. They walked fast to keep warm in the valley and were glad to rise again to the hill by the cemetery and to hurry on their way.

"It's not far now," Jean said, with a grateful glance at the boy who strode along at her side. "It was awfully good of you to come." She walked so fast that Rex could hardly keep up with her. "See," she cried suddenly over her shoulder—"do you see?"

Rex saw nothing but a wood of spindling birch and pine trees.

With the effort to read the enigmatic wonder of it, Jean's eyes were wide. The veil of mist which shrouded the spectral birches was there for the rending. Something seemed near that she longed to grasp. As she moved forward among the trees the wondrous expectation lay on her pure face, the mystery of it in the depths of her black-fringed eyes. More than once, she stopped and listened, straining her ears to the whispering of the leaves, to the sheen of the moonlight, to the drifting mist. Then she moved on again between the trees. She had forgotten Rex. She was carried away, caught

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up in an ecstasy by the beauty and the strangeness of it all.

But to him all the beauty and the strangeness and the wonder were in her.

"Jean," he breathed, as he followed her. "Oh, Jean!" His young voice broke.

Jean, at the edge of the wood, looking out upon the waste of sands, heard and stopped uncertainly.

"Jean — Jean." He was close behind her. The sands made her afraid. She turned blindly and Rex caught her in his arms.

She saw his face above her, his eyes gazing down with a light that made her own slowly close. She was wrapped in a trance of sweetness — and then he kissed her — gently at first, but, as he felt the softness of her body, more passionately, on her face, on her hair, on her lips. When he paused for breath, she did not move.

"Jean," he whispered, "Jean, do you love me?"

She pushed him away, half-dazed.

"I don't know," she said. She was shivering. "Oh, let us go back." She turned brusquely away, making her way blindly back through the wood.

"Why did you?" she cried as he caught up with her.

"Why did I?" he asked indignantly. "Why did you let me? You know you did."

She shivered again. "Oh, yes, I know I did."

"But, Jean," — his voice was troubled, — "didn't you like me to kiss you?"

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She paused; then answered honestly, "Yes."

"Then," — his voice was exultant, — "then, darling, you love me."

"Are you sure, Rex? I don't think I do."

"Of course, you silly girl. Of course you love me. You most dear and beautiful. Give me your hand."

She let him take it and they walked on together. But as he bent down to look into her face, he was uneasy at the look in it. "Darling," he begged, "don't be unhappy. After all, what has happened? You have done nothing so dreadful and have made me most awfully happy."

"I'd rather be miserable," she said fiercely. "I *have* done something dreadful."

"But you love me, darling, so it's all right."

"How do you know that I love you?" Her voice was very low.

"Oh, it's always that way. The girl never knows till the man tells her and kisses her."

"I should." Her voice was stifled. "I am sure that I should."

"No, you would n't," he answered decidedly. "So, come, do be cheerful. I am so awfully happy. You are so beautiful and sweet. Look up at me."

She shook her head, fighting against a temptation to meet his eyes and lose herself again. "No," she said firmly. "No. And please, please, if you really love me, be nice now and let go my hand and talk sensibly for the rest of the way home."

Rex, mindful of the days to follow, did as she

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asked, and the walk back was as uneventful as the walk out had been. At the gate Rex demurred at leaving her.

"I can't, you know, until I know that you're safely in the house. It's half-past two o'clock."

"I left the front door unlocked and I can slip in quite easily."

"Well, I shall just come with you as far as the steps and see that you do."

They turned in together, and walking on the grass in the shade of the trees, reached the house without sound. There Jean slipped off her shoes and went up the steps, crossed the porch, and laid her hand on the knob. She was just turning to wave to Rex that all was well when the door opened from within. John Erskine stood on the threshold, his face and figure dark against the dimly lighted hall.

"Oh, J.E." Jean's voice had a curious mixture of fear and relief. "How did you know? Have you waited up? It's awfully late."

"Yes, it's late." His voice was stern. "Is any one with you?"

She answered without hesitation. "Yes, Rex Challoner."

There was a step on the porch and Rex approached. He had not been prepared for this, but he was not a coward.

"Oh, Dr. Erskine," he began, "it's my fault if Jean — "

He got no further.

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"Good-night, Mr. Challoner." The tone was curt, cold, and decided and the door was closed.

"It was n't his fault any more than mine," Jean declared, following John into the study. "I've always wanted to see the sand-dunes by moonlight — we thought it would be fun —"

"And was it?" His voice was hard.

The girl looked at him for an instant only. Then her lids fluttered and fell before his searching glance. His eyes were blazing; the vein that only showed in moments of passion zigzagged across his forehead.

"Oh, no," she said hurriedly, "it was n't much. But I did n't mean to do anything wrong. You know I did n't, J.E., don't you?"

Silence answered her. In it a realisation of the night's excursion, as John saw it, gradually grew upon her, stifling her. To him it was an escapade. Could he not understand — would he not! With an extreme effort she again raised her eyes and looked at him — her face was white, innocent, tense. She would not appeal, but she would state. If he would only see. But he did not. His back was turned to her, his figure rigid.

For the first time since she had been beneath his roof she felt alone and lonely. It seemed incredible that he should fail her now when she was bewildered, when she so wanted help. If she could only break this silence, beat down the strange barrier which was tangibly between them, and explain. Yet how could she explain? The memory, less of Rex's

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kisses than of her own acceptance of them, came to her with a sudden shock. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done. Courage and confidence in herself, in her own motives for the night's walk, left her. Yet her reason battled for her. What had she done? If she loved Rex, all was right. If she did not, she had been taken unawares, overcome by a temptation as new as it was unsuspected. She wavered — no, there was nothing that she could explain. She turned to the door. She was very tired now.

“Good-night,” she said in a low voice.

“Good-night,” he spoke with an effort, over his shoulder. “Your candle is in the hall. Good-night.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

WITH the closing of the door John Erskine turned. His will had held him there, his back to her, though every fibre, every racing drop of blood, every nerve was calling to her. He loved her —

He looked now at the place where she had stood and saw her still — slim, dark, innocent, appealing, and — desirable. He said the word with a shudder which marked the recognition of the woman in the child whom he had cherished.

Once allowed, it was repeated — desirable — desirable; but if to him, then to a whole world of men. God, how he hated the boy! He trembled still with the passions that had shaken him since he had found her gone.

If the village call had not come for him; if he had not found the door unlocked, her handkerchief upon the ground, would he, perhaps, never have known? A panic fear had taken him to her room, followed by a jealous rage, when, silence answering his knock, the bed lay smooth beneath his hand. And then, the tearing hurt and pain of her deceit.

Yet none of these, fear, hate, nor hurt, had told him the truth till her return with the boy merged all in awakened passion. In that revealing moment he had known that he loved her.

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Now he must endeavour to understand this incredible, appalling fact, face this impossible position. His head seemed filled with a tangle of red-hot, darting thoughts. He must bring them to some coherence. He turned uncertainly. He was spent, but he could not rest. The torture of his mind kept his body moving up and down the room.

Surely there was a huge irony in the situation which must divert the Gods! He said the Gods, but he meant that God of his fathers whose presence even the unbelieving son of the Puritans must feel in time of stress.

He felt "the Gods are just" — "our God is a just God" — what if more than irony were here? If reparation were turned to punishment? Punishment — he met the idea dully.

His thoughts came now in flashes — detached, in phrases, in single words. They were words which he had never consciously used — words which to a type of modern mind have lost their force — but they were words which were natural to the lips of his fathers. Remorse — punishment — expiation — renunciation. Renunciation! That was the word — that was the way. And after would come desolation — intolerable emptiness — he dared think on that no more. It was incredible that he had believed himself paying the debt to the child all these years, when the child had been filling his life with the joy of her youth, with the sight of her

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waxing beauty, with the delight in her growing powers. Fool! He had told her in this very room so short a time ago that he was only doing his duty.

Yet he had meant well — he told himself weakly. People had applauded, had talked of a sacrifice when he took her, small, frail, sensitive, unwanted by her own kin. Then there was no promise of this beauty and this charm. He could not have foreseen that she would grow daily fairer, more like Mary; yet still unlike. Unsparingly, he searched himself and knew how long ago duty had become pleasure. He knew she had interested him from the first. He would never have wasted his time on her unless she had — would not have taken her into his walks and talks and work. He realised now that she had grown day by day and year by year into the very centre of his world — that understanding, affection, love had all prepared the way for this passion which, smouldering, had now burst into flame. To save her from himself — to save himself from dishonour — she must go.

He stopped for the first time in his walk, his face grey and drawn. He must plan for the immediate future.

He turned to his desk and sat down. But before he took up his sister's letter which lay there, a wave of pain surged over him again, made up of a crowd of petty, torturing thoughts. What of this evening? Had she deceived him so before? What had hap-

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pened? Had the boy dared — had she — He gripped himself. Suspicion was intolerable.

He took up the letter and read it. Mrs. Gray asked if she might have Jean for a long visit and ended with the word he sought: —

“Frances will not be here. She is sailing on the 15th with our old governess, Miss Hawks, for a summer abroad. They are going first to Munich for the summer opera season at the Prinz Regenten Theatre and for the Strauss festival.”

He must make his decision now. Before the sight of her could betray him into weakness. To-day was the 10th. He would arrange by wire. This first, to send her from him and the future would take care of itself. He drew a block to him and wrote: “Should consider it great favour if Jean could join Frances, sailing 15th. Arrange for stateroom and letter of credit to suitable amount. Draw on me.” He signed it with a firm hand, folded it, put it in his pocket and rose. It was four o’clock. He drew the blue curtains apart. Dawn was breaking. Jean was sleeping above. How many dawns would break and find him here alone.

But self-pity he would not allow. He had deserved his punishment. It was just. Therefore to be borne as unflinchingly as might be. The only unbearable pain would be to see Jean ever suffer as well.

He turned from the window with a face stamped by the night of suffering, looked around the room

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with dull eyes, then opened the door, walked down the hall and left the house.

Jean, sleepless in the room above, heard the door close.

CHAPTER XXIX

BUFF walls above a white wainscot, an Adams mantelpiece holding old silver candlesticks and yet older blue vases of Chinese porcelain; the beautiful grain and rich colour of cherished mahogany, white matting, and blue carpets; and a bare polished table reflecting the white gleam of silver and masses of blue flowers — these were the details which together made the dining-room a pleasant place.

Yet to two of the three who met there this morning it was a place of gloom. Cousin Roxina had been waiting for some time before Jean came slowly down and took her seat without a word of excuse.

“Every one is very late,” Cousin Roxina fussed.

Jean did not answer. What was going to happen? Would J.E. come to breakfast and lecture her afterwards? Or would he stop away all day and then ignore it? She hoped that he would have it out with her and say what he felt. She told herself that she could not bear a hostile silence. She began to eat mechanically, her eyes on her plate, feeling numb and tired after the sleepless night, till a step on the verandah and a shadow in the window made her heart leap. He was coming.

“Sorry I am late,” his voice was controlled. “I went for an early dip in the creek,” he explained to Cousin Roxina. “Good-morning, Jean.”

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He sat down, laying a letter on the table. "Yes, I went out early and had my bath and got the mail. There's a letter here from Marian. A great chance for you, Jean." His tone was almost genial in his effort to keep out all bitterness. "Frances is going abroad with Miss Hawks to spend the summer. Going to Munich for the opera and the musical festival. I want Jean to go with her." He addressed the old lady. He could not look at the girl.

"For the land's sake!" Cousin Roxina exclaimed; "John Erskine, where do you get your ideas? When are they going?"

"The 15th."

"The 15th? Only five days. She never could get ready — to go to Europe — in five days — Well, I never did —"

Jean sat still, speechless. He was sending her away. He did not trust her — could never have cared for her. She raised her head and gave him one startled, level, appealing glance which he refused to see.

"My dear cousin, of course she can get ready. What is a summer abroad? Anything that she needs she can get in New York — Miss Hawks will know. It's a great opportunity — Strauss — Wagner — the Mozart operas given as they are nowhere else —"

"I don't believe she wants to go a bit," Cousin Roxina declared uneasily. "Do you, Jean?"

"Yes, if J.E. wants me to." She spoke steadily. "He knows, I suppose."

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"You will enjoy it," he said doggedly. "Any girl would enjoy it."

"Of course I shall enjoy it." She braced herself to the occasion. Poor J.E., he could not bear to have her in the house. Yet he had the decency not to want to send her away to be unhappy. The least she could do was to help him — to fall in with his plans. "It's a splendid chance, Cousin Roxina," she declared.

"To go so far," the old lady murmured.

John pushed back his chair sharply. "Nonsense, far! It's nothing in these days. You know that the girls go to Paris and back for their clothes for the season and never think twice of it." But as he spoke the knowledge that seasons would come and go before she would return held him motionless. Was there no other way? Must these five days be spent in this defence — holding her away from him, wearing a mask which she had never known? The longing was upon him to turn, to hold out his hand to her, to see her face melt from its white pride. He walked steadily out of the room and they heard him go down the hall to the study.

Jean rose. "I'll do the flowers now."

"Just as if nothing had happened?" Miss Roxina was incredulous.

"Why not?" Jean spoke shortly over her shoulder, as she went out. The strain had told upon her temper.

When John Erskine came in at four o'clock he

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found Cousin Roxina alone in her sitting-room. He threw a telegram on the table.

"Jean must get her things together." He walked to the open window and stood, staring out.

"She has gone to her room. She has a headache, John. I've never known Jean to have a headache."

He turned. "When you go in to see her, tell her that the Challoner boy has been called home and left a good-bye for her."

"Dear, dear. Seems as if a lot was happening to-day. She will be sorry. I thought something, maybe, was wrong between them that he had n't been here to-day."

"What could be?" John asked shortly.

Miss Roxina hesitated. "I don't know — they have been great friends."

John turned on his heel and left the room.

"Cousin John is very short at times," she said to herself. "Something is the matter now. But I don't know what. Well, I'll go and tell Jean."

She found the girl lying on her bed in her room, her face hidden.

"Thank you, Cousin Roxina," she said in reply to the message. "Yes, my head is better. No, I shan't begin to pack till the morning and I don't want any supper. Thank you — no — I don't want anything."

The following days seemed lost to Jean in a maze of wearisome detail. She tried to pause, to catch at time, to stay her feet on the threshold of this new

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experience, but she found herself hurried on, presumed to be competent and calm, to be interested in Constance's decisions as to what should be taken and what left, in Miss Meek's hundred last stitches, or in Cousin Roxina's troubled foldings and refoldings. But her head beat and buzzed and she acted mechanically under Constance's direction, hardly knowing what she did. It seemed so impossible that J.E. should let her go like this. Reluctant at first to accept Constance's proffered experience and help, she ended by a complete dependence, clinging to the older woman, seeming not to want her out of her sight, until on the last afternoon, as they sat exhausted in Jean's room over a hasty cup of tea, Constance, studying the girl's tired, strained face, was moved to speak.

"Jean, don't think it silly, but I must tell you how much the last few days have meant to me. I have always loved you. But you have always held me off. It has hurt because I have felt that it was my fault: that, if I had been wiser, you would have turned to me."

Jean caught her breath. "Oh, please don't. It was never your fault. I was such an idiot. I wanted to let myself care — but I could n't. You never can imagine — I'll tell you. I've been jealous! Jealous of you, Miss Constance — "

"Jealous!" The elder woman's face paled.

"Oh, don't you see? You were grown up and I was only a child and J.E. liked going to see you."

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"Jean!"

"Yes, I must tell you! I almost hated you."

"And I was so stupid that I never imagined."

"Oh, I could not have borne it if you had."

"Of course not. And now?"

Jean laughed, but the laugh ended in a catch of the voice. "I feel that I am grown up, too."

"I see."

Jean read the pain in her voice. "It's more than that," she said impulsively. "I have been so unhappy and so — lonely these last few days. And you are so calm and strong, like a mother —" Her voice broke.

"My dear!" Constance's voice thrilled with tenderness. "Poor little girl. I have thought — I have felt — is it Rex?"

"Rex!" The surprise in the girl's voice was answer enough.

"Well, remember," Constance said firmly, "that I am always the same, always here, and" — she smiled — "that whoever else you may have to be jealous of, it will not be me."

Jean threw up her head. "That would n't make any difference to me now," with pitiful bravery. "And I think you're the most splendid woman in the world!"

Constance gathered her into her arms, holding her tight for an instant in silence. Then, with a kiss, she left her.

John, unable to face a last evening, was yet un-

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able to stay away. He did not come to supper, but he appeared in the sitting-room at nine o'clock. Jean was writing baggage labels at the table and Cousin Roxina was finishing a pair of bedroom slippers.

Jean looked up. Her tired little face, in the dark frame of hair, the pathetic droop of the red mouth, the blue circles beneath her eyes touched him to the quick. He had to remind himself sternly that he was cruel to be kind.

"You are too tired to play?" he said as he sat down.

"Never, J.E."

She went to the piano and, opening it, touched the notes softly. She was not too tired, but afraid to play. He knew that she was, but he longed and hungered to hear. For a moment it might bring them closer together, before this final parting.

Tentatively she struck a chord. Then her fingers strayed into the song of Sollweg from "Peer Gynt." She played it singingly, "But I shall come again." Did he know the words? Would he think her silly, sentimental? As she played the last note, Cousin Roxina sniffed emotionally. Jean sprang up, glad of an excuse to stop.

"Oh, Cousin Roxina! Is n't she silly, J.E.? I am only going for two months." She hung over the old lady. "I shall be back again before you know it. Don't cry."

"You and John are all I've got in the world," the old lady quavered.

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"Well, we shall think that we are more than you deserve if you cry about it," John said kindly. "It's time for us all to go to bed. We have to be up early. I hope to take Jean as far as Attica to meet Frances." He turned away.

At his words, Jean, closing the piano, looked up eagerly.

But John was going towards the door. "Good-night," he said without looking back.

"Good-night," she answered in a low voice, her head bent as she drew the green cover gently down. "Only two months," she said under her breath. "And perhaps he will say something to-morrow. If only he says something to-morrow!"

But when the morning came, John Erskine was called to attend a case of life and death. There were no good-byes said. It was Miss Savage who took Jean into the little town and saw her into Miss Hawks's capable hands on board the New York express.

CHAPTER XXX

THE exaltation which often accompanies an act of self-sacrifice is not unusually succeeded by a corresponding depression during which the other state of feeling seems remote and its resultant action absurd.

While Jean was still with him, in his care, under his roof, John had held himself sternly in hand, nerved to the one only possible course of action which was open to him, if he, in any degree, intended to keep his own esteem. Her innocent youth and the touching beauty which had made him love her gave him the chivalrous strength to save her from himself. With her before him, he had no temptation to betray his own honour, but was, on the contrary, held, by his knowledge of her belief in him, to carry to its end, whatever the cost to himself, his first decision.

A stern self-judgement, a grim satisfaction in a vicarious atonement in his own body for a past sin, a Puritan stoicism carried him through the days that passed to Jean's going.

He refused to see that she suffered. He told himself that change would set all right with her. That if she cared for Rex, — which he doubted, — or if she carried any disturbing sense of a troubled self-respect resulting from the nocturnal escapade, or

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if she were merely hurt at his firm determination to send her away, which he realised that she must misjudge and misunderstand — if she were unhappy from whatever reason, the voyage, the journey, new scenes, people, and the great music would soon awaken new interests and enthusiasms to the exclusion of all that had gone before.

He had allowed himself only the anticipated weakness of taking her to Attica, the melancholy pleasure of a last hour alone with her. But he had accepted almost gratefully the necessity which had snatched even that solace from him. An inherited fatalism had told him that he was rightfully deprived of it, that the mere contemplation of it was a forbidden indulgence.

He had finished his day in a stubborn refusal to think of her as gone. But when, towards evening, it was necessary to return home — when he came back to the knowledge that the house was empty of her presence, his fortitude left him. He stopped the horses at the steps, threw the reins to his man, leaped out and hurried across the stone verandah, through the house to his study.

Now that it was done, that she was gone, he was seized with a kind of panic fear of his own self-inflicted suffering. He had known that when it was over realisation would come. And it was here — his flesh rebelled. Life without her became an unthought-of possibility. He wanted her with an intolerable longing. Nothing that he could urge,

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no duty, no moral obligation, seemed a strong enough reason for suffering this agony. It was well to say that she must go while he could still call her to him, but now? No call could reach her. And she would pass further and yet further from him. The thought was torture. He must go to her! Go to her now — at once. Action that would take him to her seemed the only possible course. He could drive to Attica — twenty miles, and get the express there for New York. He could be in New York in the morning. He could be at their hotel in time for breakfast. He could see her — little Jean — little Jean — see her! See the colour dye her small face, see her grey eyes darken. He could hear her voice, indescribably glad, cry, “Oh, J.E.!” with the break that he loved. He could hold her slim brown hands in his. He could see her, hear her, touch her. The boat did not leave till the afternoon. He would take her away — drive her to the park — anywhere — only alone — alone with him —

And then? He came to a standstill in his rapid pacing. Suppose he followed her for a bare sight of her — or even for the sake of an hour alone with her? How should it profit him? For — and this he knew well — he could never speak of love to her — never, he reiterated, tell her —

But he must! For a moment, suffering blinded him to the real issue. He had once been weak. Suppose he were now just a little weaker? A little weaker — supremely weak — damned to the utter-

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most depths for her? He would suffer any torment there for her. Shaken by the thrill and the mad glory of the temptation, he walked to the clock. There was yet time to throw a few things in his bag, order the horses, and make the train.

A knock. The door opened abruptly.

"Jean has left her umbrella." Cousin Roxina held the article in her hand. Her eyes were red — her nose was red — she looked very tired and pathetic. "What shall we do?"

John gazed at her. Jean had left more than the umbrella. "Do? Shall I take it to New York, to her, to-night?"

Cousin Roxina gasped. "It's too late. The train left at six."

"I can get the train at Attica. I can drive."

"But for an umbrella — "

"True," he laughed, "for an umbrella."

"All the way to New York?" She thought him quite mad.

"Perhaps she left it on purpose," he suggested. "Perhaps she wants a new one."

"But it's a quite good one."

"Quite good." He smiled ironically. "A little damaged. She will do well to change it. Put it away, Cousin Roxina, I am not going." He turned on his heel and walked down the room. The old lady had been crying. What a relief tears — facile tears — must be — He turned kindly.

"See here, Cousin Roxina, you must n't feel cut

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up about her going. Believe me, it's the very best thing for her or I should be the last one to wish it."

"I know you're right, John, but, as Martha says, the house is so empty without her. We've had her so long now. Why, John, it's five years since she came — more."

He stood at his table, touching the flowers that Jean had arranged. "And you think, Cousin Roxina that she's been fairly happy with us?" He spoke without looking up.

"As happy as the day is long."

"Well, our business is to keep her happy. That's why she has gone abroad — I had — forgotten —"

"Forgotten?" Miss Roxina was wiping her eyes. "Forgotten! Oh, I hope she won't be seasick. I put a lemon in her bag where she'll see it first thing when she gets her brush and comb." She looked up at John fervently.

"As good as anything," he said perfunctorily, not to disappoint her of a professional opinion. "I wired for fruit and flowers to the boat — girls like that kind of thing."

Martha appeared at the door.

"Dinner is ready." She sniffed audibly. It was her way of asserting her share in the family fortunes.

It was not till later in the night, when the last train for New York was speeding on its fiery-eyed way, that John Erskine, his head buried in his hands above his desk, after battling through a new depth

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of desolation, at last found relief in the thought that Jean was now irrevocably beyond his reach and shuddered to think where his earlier madness might have led him. He slept that night.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE heat was intense that summer in Tacitus.

Constance Savage came down early one morning towards the end of August, hoping to work for an hour before breakfast in the garden, while the sun was not yet quite unbearable. But already, at seven o'clock, the sun had dried the dew and the garden lay so hot and still that Constance after one look turned back for her garden-hat. She knew that the sweet-peas needed picking, and that, if she was to have any presentable blooms on the late chrysanthemums, the superfluous buds should be pinched to-day.

Pinning on her wide hat she walked down the broad middle path and saw with surprise the back of a man who was kneeling at the end among the chrysanthemums. It was not the day for the gardener. It was not till she was quite close that she recognised the preacher. For once he had discarded his black hat for something cooler — a farmer's hat of straw.

"Trespassing at seven o'clock in the morning," Constance called gaily. "This is serious."

Owen Owens did not turn, but spoke over his shoulder, absorbed in his occupation.

"I asked the boy had he pinched them and he

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said he did not know one end from t'other. It's too hot for a lady to work. So I just looked in. I been here since six o'clock. It's grand to be out in the world of a morning early — 'when the sun doth arise and make happy the skies.' "

She walked round to where she could face him, in his early morning costume, his decorous black legs topped by an old white linen coat and the wide-brimmed hat.

"It's kind of you to think about my poor plants. I was just coming out to do some of them, for they have been on my conscience — oh, you have brought me some of your sweet-peas!" She bent to lift a basket of bright-winged blossoms. "No one in Tacitus has such sweet-peas — They are for me?"

"They ar-re. When are you taking your father away? I hear he looked very bad on Sunday."

"Oh, we are going this week. I know that I must take him — yet if it were not for that I would n't go. I mean, because of Dr. Erskine. He looks completely tired out. The hot weather has brought so much illness. Not that we can be of much help, but still we are here." She watched the preacher's dexterous fingers hover and nip. She had never spoken to him of John Erskine. He did not respond to her remark, his attention fixed apparently on the plants, his eye searching for the bud of selection, his fingers carrying out his intent until, with apparent irrelevance, he quoted: —

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“Man was made for joy and woe,
It is right it should be so.
And when this we rightly know,
Through the world we safely go.’

Now, ma’am, this will do for this lot. Shall I have a look at the peas?” He arose, dusting his black trousers. “I cannot see why the servants of the God of Nature should wear a sable leivery — it is most inappropriate and it shows the dust. So these ar-re the plants?”

“They ought to have been picked,” Constance avowed apologetically.

He waved an impatient hand. “Picking will keep them blooming. But you can’t make blooms like mine grow on plants like these here. Plant earlier, ma’am. Plant earlier.”

She felt he was giving them but superficial attention. They stepped back to the path together.

“Ye’ve never known the real John Erskine,” he said abruptly. “He has changed. The boy has changed.”

“Not just now,” Constance exclaimed.

“Eh?”

“Not just now.” They had involuntarily stopped. “I mean, when I came, five years ago, he had already changed. I noticed it. I had seen him before in Boston. But ought we to talk of him?” She smiled.

“We ar-re his friends.”

“But there’s nothing that we can do, is there?”

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"I fear-r gr-reatly not."

"Anyway, he's overworking now, is n't he? In this heat. They will have him all over the country and he goes wherever he is called — One good thing, he tells my father that he has bought a motor. That will save him immensely. But it does seem, sometimes, as if he were wilfully pushing himself too far."

The preacher nodded. "I have had the thought myself."

"Could n't you speak to him?"

Owen Owens shook his head, pinching his thin lips. "Well, ma'am, plant your peas on St. Patrick's Day. Early in, that's the secret."

Constance smiled. "Oh, it's not only the culture that goes into flowers that makes them grow. It's an understanding that comes from love. You've got it more than any of us. That's why yours are best. But I will try planting earlier this year."

She watched him down the road, then turned to meet the maid who came out with the morning mail. As she took the letters from the tray, she saw Jean's writing, and with an anticipation of pleasure, turned back to the old grape arbour in the garden where tiger lilies burned orange in the sun on either side the entrance, and an indulged wild convolvulus mingled its mauve-and-white blossoms with the fine grape tendrils that waved above it. Constance sat down upon the weather-stained bench within and opened the thin foreign envelope. It was from

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Munich and was full of the usual enthusiastic and detailed account of the places Jean had been to and the music she had heard. It was not till the last page that Constance found a surprise — "Have you heard that I am not going home till the spring? Hurrah! Miss Hawks wrote to ask J.E. and he says that I may stay. Miss Hawks is taking a furnished flat for Frances and me! We are going to work like Trojans. But we shall have a good time, too, I think, because Frances's mother and her aunt, Lady Mackenzie, both know people here who will be nice to us. We go to the English church because Miss Hawks knows the wife of the English Ambassador! I can see myself becoming in time a finished snob. But isn't it natural to prefer to be among the mighty few rather than in the crowd? Of course it is *most* superior to sit in the seat of the scornful, as perhaps you are doing now, dear Miss Constance."

Constance folded the letter and went in to breakfast. So Jean was not coming back. Without knowing quite why, she was not surprised. Thinking over those last days spent with the young girl, two months before, she wondered if John Erskine had suspected a dawning interest in his ward and had with instant delicacy sent the child abroad. If so, his remedy had evidently succeeded admirably. The girl was keenly interested in the new life and ready for anything that the future might bring. And Constance added that to Jean Dimmock the future might bring anything!

CHAPTER XXXII

JOHN ERSKINE welcomed the incessant calls upon his skill which kept him on the road, driving from end to end of the countryside during the late summer and early autumn. He felt that in work, in a tireless and unremitting activity, lay his only chance of sanity. As long as his profession could keep him immersed in the cares of others — could hold his interest fixed upon the others — so long could he keep his mind from his own trouble.

Out all day, on a long round of visits, out again often at night, he was too tired when he had a moment's pause to put his own pain into connected thought. He worked with grim satisfaction in his bodily fatigue, pushing his endurance to the very limit in order to drug his mind through physical exhaustion. He feared leisure for thought, dreaded blank nights when a rested body might be kept tossing for hours a prey to the restless mind.

Even Cousin Roxina was moved to a protest, when, after sending the letter which committed Jean to the prolonged year of Munich life, he started out for a drive of twenty miles on top of a long day.

"Can't they send to Attica, John? It does not seem right that you must go out again without a rest. Could n't you telephone that you can't come?"

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He waved her away impatiently. "Certainly not. I am going. Good-bye."

In the late autumn this pressure of work was over, and John Erskine was face to face with himself for long hours in the study, so filled with memories of Jean. With the determination to go straight, to bear his punishment manfully, yet afraid of his own half-understood weakness, he tried to throw himself into work of a different form. He got out the manuscript of his book and sat down before it, giving the command to himself that here his thought should centre. But page after page brought back the eager child who had helped him, till he found himself gazing with blind eyes at the words before him.

Then, realising the uselessness of evasion, he forced her image up from the shadow of the familiar room, till the vision became as real as the mirage in the desert to the eyes of the thirsting man — seeing — seeing — seeing — but never reaching, never touching. It became an exasperation beyond endurance. He could not sit still. His restlessness grew beyond control, and his temper became so uncertain that he shrank from meeting any one. His nerves played surprising tricks, rousing him to acute annoyance for the most trivial reasons.

"There's no pleasing Mr. John," Martha grumbled. "He speaks like he never used to — that quick. Or else he never says a word for the whole meal. I never see him like this afore. He never

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goes near nobody — only when he has to. Just settin' in that room and studyin'."

But there came a night when strain on body and mind at last drove him forth. The room was haunted, filled with the vibrations of her presence, with the disturbing brain waves of his own agonies lived there.

Pushed to the uttermost extremity of endurance, he fled the place, let himself out into the winter night, and walked like a drunken man quickly, uncertainly, down the path to the office.

Mr. Tanner had gone home hours before. John Erskine unlocked the door and stumbled into the small, stuffily chill, drug-laden atmosphere of the dispensary. He lit the lamp on the table and, carrying it, opened the door and walked into his office beyond. There the fire still burned in the stove.

He set down the lamp and drew a breath of relief. Here, disentangled from that maze of feelings lived but still vibrant, free in this clearer atmosphere, which seemed already tonic, he could brace himself to find some new way of life which would yet be endurable.

With a professional interest quite detached from himself, he thought cursorily, as he sat down, on this relief that a mere change of room had brought. He looked about him. The shelves bore the fine scientific library collected by his father with large additions made by himself. There was sanity to his eye in those rows of fat calfskin volumes, something

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solid upon which to rest. That other room was lined with the literature of unrest — the poetry, the essays, the plays, the novels, the philosophy of a brilliant modernity, which had been since his early manhood the food of his mental and spiritual life. With what an intellectual arrogance had he accepted their teachings in place of a sceptically rejected, unreasoned religion!

They had failed to satisfy, had failed to help. But here, he told himself, as his eyes ranged the book-lined walls, was the true religion, which asks a man's life as does the cloister, which offers a field of far adventure, of high romance; science, the true religion, offering crowns and martyrdom.

The marble busts of great men looked down upon him with cold, keen faces from along the top of the bookshelves, and he recalled the fact that he had thought himself of this following.

He turned away his eyes, shaken with a sick distaste of himself. He, who had left the field abroad to follow the call of duty; who had returned to this place penetrated by a high ideal; — he had fallen at the first temptation. He must answer now this question — Should he sink in the grip of human passion? Thwarted he knew that it works a revenge curious and complex of suffering, from which in a strong man some memorable result is to follow, whether good or bad — but far-reaching. He now realised with disgust that the end he had glimpsed up there to-night as offering itself here in this room

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was the refuge of the coward. Death — as held in vial and box and powder in the crowded shelves of the dispensary — death had lurked in the back of his consciousness, as the one escape from unbearable suffering. Here, in surroundings created by his father, the idea had no place. In that other room he had called himself the sport of chance, the plaything of fate; here he dared not. Here he knew that there is no chance, no fate, save that which every man carries in the depths of his inherited being.

Sitting in his father's chair, in the place where the sturdy old doctor had acted as providence and arbiter to the community for half a century, he realised unwillingly the forces which combat all chance in life. Chance had taken him abroad — the meeting with a fellow student in New York who was about to sail — and chance had led him then to Munich to study. But no chance had brought him back to Tacitus. Some deep, inborn proclivity, some love of place and people, some will to do the difficult, some glimpse of the larger purpose in the less, had combated the chance-born future which opened itself so pleasantly before him over there.

He had obeyed the prompting. Independent in means and movements, he had yet turned his back on ambition and on the world for this. He had come home, provided with all the new theories, all the new philosophies which point a finger at the weak spots in the social system but raise no cross

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of hope above them. He had put his pride and his brain into his work among his father's people. He had wished to lead them out of the narrow old into the broad new ways. He had given them a library in memory of his father where they could read Shaw and Wells and Ibsen and Tolstoy and Nietzsche, and they had solemnly asked for the books their fathers had read. No one but Rufus Haines had taken out Renan's "Life of Jesus." They had known Renan too long as the name of an atheist.

On Saturday afternoon Lillian Vincent, who was librarian, sat behind the table in the cheerful room with its open fire, its tables full of illustrated papers and reviews, and neatly inscribed the most conservative of the thousand books on the weekly lists of the members. And, oddly enough, as time passed, John had been glad to have it so. Perhaps distrust of his own opinions as he grew older made him less anxious to impose them upon others — especially upon people who looked up to him.

For they did that. They respected him for his untiring devotion to them in all times of illness or trouble, and they loved him too. Ah! it was his pride in their affectionate regard which had led him to —

He stopped. The old circle — would it never cease? Even here must he begin again to tread that round? He would not. He sprang up and, walking blindly forward, took down the first book that came under his hand. He glanced at it and returned it

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to the shelf. No, that would not do. He deliberately sought for a special book which it was his duty to read and compare with his own notes made recently.

Found, he examined it slowly, and returning with it to his chair, sat down. Strange that in the very first chapter he should have found something bearing upon a vexed point in his unfinished book. Very interesting, this. He turned to his desk, pulled forward a block of paper and a pencil and began to read. He read until his lamp failed him, dying down to a pale flicker which fitfully lighted a narrowed space, but left the busts of great men set high above him, remote in a pallid sphere.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CONSTANCE was alone in her sitting-room knitting with a tranquillity won from a restlessness faced and conquered. Knitting had become a gentle art in her hands, since the day when she had first taken it up in the leisure moments of her settlement work in Boston as a compromise with her conscience which would not allow her to be idle. Strangely, yet naturally, the self-contained nature of the woman had found relief in the soothing of the mechanically moving needles, and on many a day since she had worked her own unacknowledged restlessness into smooth rows of even stitches, until her mind was serene. She could knit and read. She could knit and think, as she was doing to-day. She spent many hours alone, since, when all was done that she had to do in Tacitus, much time still remained. But she was never bored. The keeping of her house, where all breathed a fine orderliness, gave her pleasure, and her interest, tinged with unmalicious humour, was very real in all the lives around her.

Yet there were days when the romances of Lillian and David, of the schoolmaster and Milly wearied her, — when the tragi-comedy of Maria Beebe's widowhood and late passion for Mr. Tanner failed to raise a compassionate smile, — when even the loveable oddities of the preacher exasperated, —

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when, in fact, she missed the companionship of her own class and kind, — when, too, she poignantly realised what her own demands on life had been and that they remained unfulfilled, — when she told herself, with an ironic smile, that her own story was all preface, yet instantly assured herself that the preface is the best part of many a story. Perhaps, in her just perception of life, she drew a modest comfort from the knowledge that her serenity, her encouragement to the dull and shy, her tender, reserved sympathy, and her practical common sense had made her influence felt in that Tacitus at whose limitations her spirit had impatiently groaned.

To-day, her open book neglected, Constance had constrained her fingers to soothe away rebellion. They had so far succeeded that her thoughts had gone their round and were now centred upon Jean Dimmock. A second autumn was here and again her return was postponed. She did not understand the girl's prolonged stay abroad. The ostensible, quite plausible reason was, of course, her music. Yet Constance found an absence of enthusiasm in Jean's letters which did not accord with a desire for further study. Jean had briefly announced that she was staying, that she would go in for the prize at the Conservatoire, but only awakened to some show of interest in a second winter's amusement. She insisted, rather unnecessarily, Constance thought, upon the prospect of gaiety, explaining her double advantage in knowing both the student set and the

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set to which she had been introduced by Frances Gray. She declared the contrast piquant. She wrote amusingly. Yet while Constance smiled over her remembered sallies, she felt a lack of heart in them which puzzled her. What a lonely child it was when all was said and done. How little she knew Jean — how little, probably, any of them knew of the real Jean. Of that Jean who had grown up there among them — who was alone and away. She shivered slightly and looked up. Maria Beebe, who, the village agreed, set a correct standard of woe to all future Tacitus widows, was passing, dressed in deep black, hugging two pots of flowers. Constance remembered that it was Saturday and Mrs. Beebe's week to "do the church." Constance gazed at her. Was it only the hard, the selfish, the self-seekers, who won their hearts' desire? Her mind jumped to John Erskine. He was a man who was baulked of his — if a face spoke the truth. Yet — what did he want?

Some one else passed. Again she looked up. It was Mr. Tanner. The tall, lank young apothecary was hastening churchward after Mrs. Beebe, and there, coming up the steps, was John Erskine.

She quickly rolled up the knitting, laid it away, rose, and turned with her calm air of poise to meet him. He thought, as he entered, that she never looked hurried or awkward or uncertain.

"You've heard the news, I suppose?" he said sardonically as he sat down.

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She smiled expectantly. "No."

"What your prescience foretold. The widow announces her approaching marriage."

"Oh, that!" she said, with an accent of distaste.

John laughed. "Oh, I suppose that poor Tanner in his store clothes is more to her than we can see. That ambush of colourless locks is ambrosial, that high, narrow forehead intellectual, that weak mouth and chin, refined. He is not a bad apothecary, but I hear that she is going to put him in charge of the store."

"Poor woman." She spoke with constraint. "It's pathetic. It's all pathetic, our constant striving after some ideal. And my ideal is funny to you, and your ideal is funny to some one else. Can't you see her, poor thing, absurdly in love, asking in her hard middle age for what she never wanted in her youth?"

He shook his head. "You see Maria weeping over the irony of life — the vanished years — the love that has come too late. She's too self-complacent. She never would."

She smiled, unconvinced.

"You are sorry for her!" he exclaimed. "But I am sorry for him."

"Poor both of them," she declared. "Either way it's pitiful, yet they will only seem ridiculous." Her tone dismissed the subject. "And you've been here five minutes and I have not thanked you for the paper you sent me. I read the review aloud to father

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and we were both delighted with the appreciation they give the book. Miss Roxina must feel now that your evenings were well spent. She was a little jealous when you moved your writing to the office."

"Yes — both she and Martha thought they had a grievance. But I did some good work there."

"I know that we saw very little of you. Jean must be delighted about the book. She used to be so proud of helping you. I had a letter from her yesterday. She is a clever child."

"What did she say?" His head was bent.

Constance laughed. "I think I must read you a bit. It is so delightfully young and egotistic." She took the letter from a case on the table and, sitting down, ran through a page or two before she began. "People seem to find me either dull, odd, interesting, or clever! Clever is the latest! One man, who cannot make head or tail of me because he is always trying to find things in me which are n't there, comes to call, and I sit him in a chair and see how much nonsense I can talk to him and have him still think it sense. For example, he is very fond of music, so I explained to him a theory which does n't exist. At first he could n't, he said, understand, but now he says he does and he makes up better stuff than I can on the subject. I said that music did n't convey colour but shape to me(!) He said he saw meadows, ladies, babbling brooks. I said that was nothing, that every one sees that; that, according to my theory, for instance, the sound of the

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Pilgrims' Chorus in 'Tannhäuser' was all round, whereas the bird's song in 'Siegfried' was like a bowl full of marbles and the fire-song like many jets of water in a fountain, etc. (A little of this is sense, I think.) Well, before I had finished, he was seeing snakes in the 'Dead March,' triangles in 'My Country, 't is of Thee,' and pentagons in 'Come over Here.' Believing it all, too, and sallying forth to spread my theory to the world. I told him that if you had a quick enough ear, the shadow of the clouds by moonlight rustled." She laid down the sheets and looked up, laughing.

John Erskine did not smile. "And while all this is going on, where's the chaperone?" he asked drily. "I hope that Baroness von Mintzel is a proper person. She had excellent recommendations."

"Of course she is," Constance hastened to assure him. "Marian knew all about her. After all" — she touched the letter — "this is quite harmless nonsense and Jean is n't a child. She is nineteen!"

"Yes," he agreed. "We men forget these things. Nineteen — Jean nineteen!" He laughed. "And the first day that I saw her in this room —" He broke off abruptly. "Pardon me. I must be growing old. May I see your father? Without disturbing him?"

"On the contrary, father would n't forgive me if he missed you. You know his latest interest?"

"His garden. Owens told me."

"A classic garden. They are doing it together. He is there now. Shall we go out?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

As John Erskine came down the steps from the parsonage he saw Rufus Haines and Milly Levis crossing the square. Even at a distance they had an air of young and confident happiness. That air of riding upon the crest which is all oblivious of any sequential break of the wave.

John Erskine turned abruptly away. They would without doubt wish to assail him with thanks. He had helped them in their search for a mating nest by renovating an old house towards which they were now doubtless taking their daily pilgrimage. They were to be married shortly and were endlessly occupied with the details of preparations. The house where they were to live had for them a sweet, mysterious, irresistible charm. They could hardly keep away from it. And since Dr. Erskine was part of it, in his quality of god in the car, they rushed at him whenever they had an opportunity, bubbling with very youthful, pretty gratitude. But thanks was the one thing the doctor could not tolerate. He snubbed them with a calm word; that it was no kindness to them but an investment for himself — which was not true. And as they knew it, they continued to be warmly grateful, not possibly understanding his irritation.

Any place where a man has lived all his life

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becomes filled with the power of evoking from the subconscious depths of his memory a succession of vivid impressions — and as John Erskine walked on along the street his actual thoughts were backed, as it were, by flashed memories which he hardly realised.

Direct and bitter were his thoughts of Jean. She could write like that, with such gay freedom, while to him her letters were laboured, brief, constrained. There was the hurt. Added to it was bitter jealousy of all the unknown in her life. Yet while these matters held the forefront of his mind, his feet led him past the church and there he saw his father slowly descending the grey, weather-beaten, wooden steps — saw the old doctor raise his hand in the familiar gesture of salute to the village people — saw the kindly, handsome, clean-shaven face, stamped already by the melancholy of disease. The vision was so usual that John did not give it more than a side-long recognition and the clashing thoughts rang on through his brain unquieted. He turned to the left down the hill, unjust in his bitterness to the grown Jean, while there before him the little Jean gathered cress in the water that overflowed from a small, mossy tub under the big elm tree. He walked on unmoved by her familiar shade. At Lower Street he glanced at the small yellow house which his money had made whole. He saw himself prone upon the step, a five-year-old in the grip of humiliation, and noticed that Milly had put

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up white muslin curtains in the front windows. He took a secret interest in the house.

Happiness seemed to come so easily to these people, — a new bathroom, two stationary washtubs, the marriage service, and they were in paradise. Not impossible of achievement — yet impossible.

John went over the bridge and out along the country road which Jean's runaway feet had pressed. He did not like walking. It was, to him, a waste of time. He was on the road so much that leisure was spent in his house and garden. Yet this afternoon movement was a necessity. He could not yet go home. Why should he go home at all — the burden was too heavy — why bear it? Why remember, when forgetfulness might be bought? He walked on rapidly. No, he had not realised the lack of intimacy, the loss of the personal touch in her letters to him, till that page gave her to him suddenly — the old Jean, so sure, outwardly, of herself and of her relation to her world and all in it. Outwardly sure; yet he had known her inward doubts, the sensitive misgivings, the shrinkings which she bulwarked by her valiant front. No one could know her as he knew her. He defied that fool, whom she sat upon a chair, to know her. With the lover's passion, with the man's instinct of covetous segregation, he mistrusted every other male who approached her. It seemed to him a profanation that any one should look upon her. And she was there, all the miles beyond his guarding, alone for

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all the world to see, to covet, to adore. The thought was intolerable, yet to be borne — this he must not forget — as his punishment. Days and hours of pain, of hopeless loneliness, all went to that — to pay — to pay —

He spurned the idea of any comfort. There was none anywhere — life became suddenly, acutely, unbearable. He walked like a drunken man, blind with despair, his feet uncertain. Work — he had proved it — was an anodyne only. There was no end to this misery of body and of mind. Where could he look for any help, when in the depth of his soul there was a lie? He groaned aloud. Was he not free to act as he would? Was he not free of ancient superstition? Was he not a modern? Had he not brought back from across the sea the belief of the nineties in the right of the individual? With his education, his intellect, his position, had he not a right to act as he believed to be best? He did not say “right.” Had he not plucked his soul from the cradle of an outworn faith and hugged it in the arms of his own pride? Could it be starving for want of the old sustenance? Was he dependent on more than mental fare for spiritual health? His thoughts beat vainly, seeking rest. Somewhere there must be something that could help. He looked up to the cold autumn sky. It gave no answer. If only he could escape from this life, from the familiar sights, — people, duties, — and fight a way to surety. The cold sky, steely above him, the bare

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trees, the iron-bound earth, gave him no sympathy. God was not to be come at so easily. He had a vision of the woods, of winter alone in a camp on North Lake, where he had been as a boy, with only the guides and the trappers near. But he knew, as quickly as the vision came, that place could not help him to peace. Every man must seek and find truth in himself — God in himself. The silence of waste places may make the search easier, but the triumph is greatest in the crowd. There is seldom a withdrawal which is not a shirking as well. Tempted to have done with work, with the dull round of duty, tempted to seek his soul afar, John Erskine turned back, like little Jean years before, to Tacitus.

As he entered the house, Martha met him.

“Wherever have you been, Mr. John?” she cried.
“And a call here for you for the last half-hour.”

CHAPTER XXXV

JOHN lived out the winter doggedly. It was the dragging, cruel winter of the North. He drove day after day through a world blank with snow, snow weighing down the low sky, snow blotting out the familiar details of the way, snow filling the air with its silence, muffling all sound, seeming to arrest hope, to set a limit to infinity, to stifle all life in its remorseless hold.

Journeying along some hardly broken track, where his eye found only a frozen horizon, John experienced a physical depression, in which mind and spirit had a part. There were days when he had a curious feeling that he was dead already, and roused himself to prove that life and energy were with him still. On other days he simply accepted this dulled and frozen level of existence as all that he could claim, and drove from farm to farm on his long round in a grim endeavour to get through it piece by piece, to plod on, as well as he could, to what sombreness of waiting future he could not know. His mind on these endless drives was busy with the past, working out a chain of consequence resultant, as he harshly told himself, from his own inherent weaknesses. There was a comfort in this bearing of a deserved penalty which he recognised. No one but himself could know the true John

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Erskine; the man whose pride was his idol — the man who had forsworn the God of his fathers for the freedom of an agnosticism which pandered to that pride, the man who had set his reason higher than his spiritual instinct, the man who, when this was done, proved the weakness of reason as a guide of life, by living a lie. Tracing back effect to cause, he clearly saw that the pride in abstract principles of right which he had vaunted was in the dust, and in his heart, stirring in his mind, were the promptings now to reach, through that doubted higher spiritual force, to truth. Who should say that reason was a surer guide than this same spiritual instinct? Yet with the *fin-de-siècle* pride of freedom, dread of superstition, thirst for proof of truth — as if truth could ever be proved or needed human proving — he still rebelled, held a brief for himself against himself, stooped to ask if the lie were not best, after all; and so returned from the bleakness of the open to the village which had the look of a prison-house to him.

There the angles of eave and roof-tree were rounded with the depth of snow, which, carried by its own weight, fell from time to time with a dull rush and thunder, unused doors were clamped by steely ice, cottage windows were glazed by a film which darkened the rooms within. Every twig of bush and tree was held by a load of snow or sheath of ice, and the trunks, to the north, were whitely crusted. Black ice, and solid, filled the watering-trough.

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Called abroad at night, John Erskine dreaded going out into this world lying in bondage. Again and again that year did spring strive to break those bonds and bring back reviving hope to man. But again and again the north wind whirled down from the forests, and with fury of storm winter was reinstated and prolonged.

John Erskine had, moreover, reached that stage in his relation to Tacitus when people begin to take for granted services which once won a stir of gratitude and commendation. He told himself that they were an ungrateful lot who accepted any sacrifice of his time or strength as their due; and as every mental state is bound to find unconscious expression, his manner became less kind, less friendly, even tinged with suspicion and constraint. This, in its turn, was reflected in the bearing of individuals towards him and awoke hurt resentment. People detected a new moroseness in the doctor's bearing and, as little charitable to a benefactor in Tacitus as anywhere else, whispered various reasons for the change. Constance, catching an echo of the talk, gave an indignant denial, while she reluctantly repeated her own inward questionings. What was the past that shadowed him? What pain had set its seal on him? What hunger burned in his eyes? Whatever the story, she told herself, she could understand. Whatever his sorrow, her sympathy was ready. Yet, in his presence, she knew that no opportunity would ever be given for her help. They

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sat within a yard of one another isolated and marooned.

The floods that swept the whole country that spring carried away a town. Men's minds were darkened for a moment by the horror, yet every one went gladly about his own business in the grateful sunshine. So it is meant to be.

Constance, conscientious, felt uneasy at her delight in the open windows, the soft air, the bowl of spring flowers on the table. She spoke the thought to John.

"It seems almost wrong to be so happy when you think of the suffering."

"I don't follow you. All nature is brutal. The world is built up on progressive suffering."

"But the suffering is for some right end." Her tone was quiet. She was very sad for him.

"You think so?" He laughed almost rudely. "Then you've never suffered."

"Oh, but I have." She was earnest. "And suffering brings strength."

"Does it? Well, I have suffered," he looked at her for one instant, revealing to what depths. "And I have no strength. I am beaten — hardened, embittered."

"Hard! Only to yourself." The words rushed out, her heart beating. "There is no bitterness in you for the people who turn to you for help."

"I'd like to wring their necks," he declared.

"No, no," she insisted. "You must allow me to know after all these years."

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"All these years — good Lord — And at twenty I thought that forty would see some good work done — so twenty always thinks, I suppose."

"Blessed be twenty," she declared gaily. "It is a glorious time. The arrogance of twenty! — All or nothing. You break your brushes, and tear up your sonnets, and close your piano, because you discover that you are not a genius. You cannot tolerate a second-best. All or nothing!" She smiled. "At thirty we open the piano quietly and are very glad for the comfort. But you have no such cause for complaint. Your work abroad, your books, have brought you note and you've done such a lot here — "

"Bosh!" he said abruptly. "But, my friend, it simply does not count. I have scratched a mark where I hoped to hew a path."

"Why don't you go on?" she asked deliberately.

"I cannot." His voice was curt. "It is no longer possible. I may smoke?" He put his hand in his coat pocket and drew out a handful of letters with his pipe. "Oh, I quite forgot. They gave me these just now at the post-office." He looked at them. "Two for you and one for me. From my sister, Nina Mackenzie." He stared at the bold hand, the London postmark. Jean was there with her.

"Read it," Constance begged. "I have not heard from Jean since she went to England." She opened her own post.

John rose and walked to the window. Her own

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letters were finished, and yet he stood motionless and she noticed there was no rustling of a turning page. He finally moved, slowly faced her, and she saw that he had the helpless, dazed look of a man who has received a blow.

"Jean is engaged." His voice was uncertain.

"Little Jean!" She rose slowly.

"Little Jean!" His voice was reckless. "Little Jean would laugh at us. She is one of the toasts of the season. She is making a great match."

"What else could you expect?" Constance spoke indignantly, springing to the absent girl's defence. His tone was not to be borne. "Did n't you keep her abroad for that? Oh, I can't understand you. What else could she do? It is n't her fault. There was always the other side to Jean. She wanted the heights."

They faced each other, moved and shaken.

"You don't understand," he cried. "You can't understand."

The door opened and Mr. Savage peered in with his near-sighted eyes.

"Ah, I thought I heard voices. Erskine, I am about to plant in Tacitus a piece of wild thyme which sprang on the slopes of Parnassus!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

SOFT spring air, drifting clouds, sunshine, and the rush of the creek in flood whispered surely to 'Bijah Bullock's simple mind of a lob worm on a hook at the end of a line and a hickory pole. No one in Tacitus knew as well as he the ways of fish or furry things. The hut on the edge of the sand-dunes when the winter was past became for him only a place to sleep. He lived out of doors, doing odd chores in the village at times, but was generally to be found with a crust in his pocket, haunting the woods and streams.

The catastrophe which had troubled Miss Savage to-day had no deterrent effect upon 'Bijah's pleasure. He shambled off with his loose-jointed gait, which looked slow because awkward, yet which could be so swift, to cut a new fishing-pole and to look for bait. The woods, as he plunged into their depths on the far slope of Mount Eliza, greeted him with the first earthy, pleasant smell of early spring. He sniffed it with the keen nostrils of the woodsman. He recognised unconsciously in it all the component perfumes and pungencies. Here, beneath the hickory scrub, piercing the litter of dead autumn leaves, wind flowers swayed on delicate stems, a fairy band, tremulously responsive to the faintest breath. 'Bijah Bullock had no sentiment about

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flowers. His big foot crushed a dozen of the pale blossoms at a step. Where he stopped to cut his stick, a clump of purple hepaticas, nestling in their heart-shaped leaves at the foot of the tree, was rudely bruised by his foot. He was a savage. Nature was only to him the harbourer of animal life. He cut the pole with his big jack-knife and tramped away through a little glade, where in the moisture of the hillside spring the ground was splotched by the beautiful leaves and yellow heads of dog-tooth violets. He went plunging on ruthlessly, crooning to himself, towards the creek.

'Bijah knew well every secret of his craft. He knew, besides the village gardens, in just what low meadow to tap with his stick and reap a rich harvest of emerging worms. He travelled there now and filled his bait-box easily.

He returned then to the road. It was the quickest way to reach that point on the creek which he longed, itched to fish. His mind was busy with the chances now. Flood meant thick, troubled water with plenty of food for fish — fish feeding on the bottom — fish swept from their usual beds — another big fellow — a three-pounder, perhaps — carried in, as in last year's freshet, under the big bank at the big pool at the bend of the road. Already in imagination 'Bijah saw the fish lying sulky, deep in the murky water, hardly moving, tempted by the worm which sank and wriggled so naturally near his nose, saw the open mouth, then the swift rush of the fish, and

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the skill with which he would land him. Not improbably he would have to work around from the high bank keeping his line taut, and land him on a sandbank below. A landing-net was an unknown article to 'Bijah. Small fish he hoicked out.

Arrived at the creek, he stood for some time astonished at the quantity of water coming down. It was higher than even he had ever seen it. The torrent came down in a swirling flood, tossing its jetsam of log and branch out in the current, while here at the bend it swept steadily round, forming a deep, eddying pool of smooth black water. Under this bank, undercut by the current, lay the fish. Trembling with eagerness, he dropped his pole on the ground, produced a stick wound with line from his pocket, with a tin box of fish hooks and sinkers and gave himself up with devotion to the rite of preparing his tackle. When his rod was equipped to his satisfaction, he crept forward to the edge of the bank and peering over, thrilled with excitement, he carefully lowered and sunk his worm.

His most sanguine expectations had not prepared him for the instant rush which caught his line, the rush of a big fish and strong current. He felt his line going — tried to recover it by a jerk, the bank gave way, and with a howl the boy found himself thrown into the water. His poor skill in swimming yet kept him afloat. But all around him the yellow clay bank, scooped out, rose smooth, giving no finger-hold. Battling with feeble strokes

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to keep himself afloat, he was caught by the current and swept out into the stream, just as John Erskine, who, passing, had sprung from his motor at the boy's despairing shout, reached the shore.

For a second, casting off shoes and coat, John stood upon the bank, then, with a heartening hail, he ran along the bank and, calculating distance and angle, he plunged into the flood some yards below the point where 'Bijah was being whirled along. The water was very cold. John struck out for the middle of the creek, with the intention of seizing the boy as he was swept past him. It had all been the work of an instant. He had rushed to the rescue with a man's unthinking instinct. But now, as he felt the press of the water, the strength of the current, and saw the mass of half-sunken débris which it carried he realised the danger of his undertaking. For a moment he felt fear. In the next, he had faced and conquered it, and his mind, unusually clear, was shouting orders to his body. He was swimming with precision, husbanding his strength, keeping an eye upon the boy who, spun about at the sport of the current, was yet being borne directly towards him. In a moment the boy's shoulder, as he swept by, would be in his grasp. Now the sandy head was only a few yards away, when a sunken log striking a hidden rock heaved suddenly up between them. The boy was carried past on the other side and John caught a glimpse of his silly, blank, panic-stricken face through the skeleton branches.

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Flinging himself upon the current with a grim and fierce determination to save that terrified rag of humanity that now outstripped him, John fought his way, losing a foot here, gaining a yard there, that white and stupid face always beyond his reach. It seemed years before he felt himself borne by an uplift of the current down upon the boy, who, with a wild clutch, seized him. There was a moment's fight, then both went under. All that followed was confused to John, until he found himself striking out for land, the boy's limp body in his grasp.

But the shore seemed miles away. His breath came tearing painfully through his lungs. He ached in every muscle. He was numbed by the cold. The possibility loomed before him that he might not reach that absurdly distant shore — and flashing upon him came the exultant thought that here was no ignoble solution of the problem of living that had seemed too hard. Life unbearable, death had kindly offered. What bliss just to relax the straining muscles, to sink with his unconscious burden out of life! Already his stroke had slackened, when clear came the goading reminder that to all that little world of Tacitus he, John Erskine, so unworthy of their faith, would die a hero's death.

"Damn Tacitus," he groaned, and striving, straining, slowly, inch by inch he covered that stretch of water, he gained the bank. There, clutching the grass with a feeble hand, he was exerting all his

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exhausted energies to draw the boy out of the sucking current, when two strong arms from above came suddenly around them and, with the assurance of safety, he fainted.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"AN' they do say as how if Dave Donner an' Lillian Vincent had n't come drivin' by just plumb at that minute an' second, Dr. Erskine would 'a' been a goner. He'd just reached the bank with 'Bijah, but he was so exhausted he could n't crawl ashore when David — he'd seen the automobile standin' empty — gives a leap out er the buggy an' down he goes an' lifts 'em both out jest in time." Thus Miss Meeks.

"You don't say!" Maria Beebe for once in her life was too much interested in her own affairs to give more than half an ear to gossip. She was "trying on," — always a lengthy, absorbing process, even in Tacitus. "I don't know which I like best. The trimmin' straight or slantin', Laura."

"An' it was on the way back that David asked her to marry him. An' about time I say. Not that her mother thinks he's half good enough. But I think he's a good-looking young feller — an' his hair's as black — "

"Yes, I know," Maria interrupted. "But's long's you're here to sew for me, Laura Meeks, I wish you'd pay attention. Now, tell me here, *this* way or that? Which makes me look the slimmest?"

Miss Meeks rose, her nose red with annoyance.

"Neither," she said acidly. "You can't expect

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to look slim, Maria, at your age. I'd have fulness in the back o' that hobble skirt, too, if 't was me."

"I did n't ask your judgement an' I'll thank you to keep it till it's asked. Hobble or no hobble, it's the fashion. Goin' with Mr. Tanner to N' York an' Niagara I've got to be in the fashion." She paused. Then, looking up anxiously, "Have n't I, Laura?" she appealed.

"I s'pose so," the dressmaker agreed. An obscure pity for her friend pierced her envy. "I 'low you kin have it more sense an' less hobble an' still look fashionable," she declared. "I'll fix it — an' the trimmin' straight." Scanning the silhouette in the glass, Miss Meeks stiffly knelt to deal with the delicate problem before her.

"Well," Maria declared, watching the other in the glass, "I know Tacitus, Laura Meeks, like the inside o' my pocket. I s'pose the whole village can't talk o' nothin' else."

"I guess not," Miss Meeks agreed with animation. "There's a knot o' men talkin' at the store. An' Mr. Owens tellin' 'em it would 'a' paid 'em well out ef the doctor'd been took after the way they've been jawin' this winter 'bout him. Old Owens, he can give it to 'em when he gits started. Mr. Tanner was gittin' the p'int o' the discourse when I left 'em."

"Joey?" Maria's face turned crimson. "Joey?"

"I did n't exactly gather what for. But the preacher was givin' him a lot o' jaw 'bout gratitude.

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An' the schoolmaster was sayin' hot things about them that has started libelling reports the past winter. An' that Tacitus were n't no place for them."

"Don't you think that's too much fullness, Laura?" Maria's voice was feeble. "Joey talks o' sellin' out the store, an' if we live in N' York or in Niagara I got to be in the style, ain't I?"

Miss Meeks stood off to study the effect. "Ef 't was me not a smitch would I take out o' that skirt. In your position, M'ria, you kin afford to set the fashion — a little."

"I s'pose you're right," Maria agreed.

There was silence for a moment, while Miss Meeks once more carefully adjusted folds. "They're talkin' of a testimonial, an' a public meetin', an' I don't know what else," she burst out. "Everybody's kinder ashamed, I guess, the way they been thinkin'!"

"I did n't know the creek was so deep and dangerous," Maria cavilled.

"Well, don't you say that outside this room, M'ria Beebe. Even I can tell you that it is. It's a roarin' flood. Just you go an' have a look. All the boys in the village been down inspectin' of the place this mornin'. They're sayin' free that no other man in Tacitus could 'a' made it but the doctor. There — now I call that skirt decent — not so French, maybe, but chick all the same. Take it off an' let me get to work." She sat down in the sewing-chair by the window, the waist in her hand, and while

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Maria extricated herself from the skirt she continued: —

“Miss Savage come by while I was waitin’ ’round. She an’ Mr. Owens seem to have an understandin’ all right, shakin’ hands, an’ talkin’ an’ smilin’ an’ laffin’.”

“She ain’t goin’ to ketch the doctor all the same.”

“I ain’t sayin’ she was after him,” Miss Meeks rebuked.

“You ain’t! An’ I’ve heard you say it ag’in an’ ag’in in this very room, Laura Meeks.”

“Not serious. They’re real friendly, that’s all. Why, Mr. Savage is gettin’ old. They’ll be puttin’ in a young man an’ Miss Savage’ll be goin’ back to Boston, marryin’ there. You mark my words.”

“An’ you mark mine. She’ll never marry.”

They glared at each other over Constance’s fate, the battle drawn.

“ ’T ain’t everybody thinks continual o’ marryin’!” Miss Meeks added tartly.

“ ’T ain’t everybody as gits the chance,” Maria countered. “I don’t set much store by those tales o’ women what’s above men an’ matrimony. Those that gets the askin’ does the takin’, I’ll bet.”

Miss Meeks sniffed. “To think o’ the chances I had when I was young. When we lived in that yellor house the doctor’s fixin’ up for Rufus Haines, I could ’a’ married a dozen times ef I’d wanted. That was before you set foot in this town. Those were the days.”

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Maria was silenced now, as she always was, by Laura Meeks's reference to her fall in fortunes. Maria did not care to be reminded of her own early days.

"Well," she said propitiatingly, "you must have been a real good-lookin' girl. You've got a good figure still. But Miss Savage is no beauty."

"No," Laura allowed reluctantly; "only real pleasant-looking. Not a beauty like Jean Dimmock was. Did I tell you what I heard about her?" She paused. "Did n't I? Why, I got it straight from the parsonage. You know over there where she was in Germany, some place, where she was studyin' her music?"

"Yes."

"Well. She was goin' in for some kind of a prize, or somethin'. Anyhow she's failed. An' Dr. Erskine's sister, Evelina, — Nina they call her, — you don't remember her — she was a high stepper — no looks, but a figger — who married an English lord. Well, she come an' took Jean off to England. An' she's there now an' she's been there all the spring."

"Failed, did she?" Maria repeated. "Well, I can't say as how I'm breakin' my heart over it. Will she be comin' back here?"

"I dunno. I'd like to see her clo'es. Do you recollect, M'ria, one black velvet dress she used to wear to church?"

"Yes, spendin' so much money on a plain thing like that was ridiculous."

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"'T was his sister in Boston who dressed her. The doctor never had no say, only to pay the bills. An' every one knows that she ain't dependent on him like that, anyway. She ain't got much, but she's got enuff."

"Well, I just tell you, Laura Meeks, I'll be glad to get away from this place. It's always Erskine — Erskine here. As Joey says, give me a city where you can see some life an' meet congenial friends. An' be independent. There, I've got this basted. Shall I try it on again?"

Laura Meeks looked up. "There ain't no need," she said. "Country things never do look right, anyway, in the city."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHEN, unwilling to give his memory to an unmerited posthumous glory, John Erskine had refused to sink, but rather pushed for the land, it did not occur to him that once ashore with his burden, he must face an enthusiastic revival of popularity.

David Donner had hauled them both out, unconscious, from the shallow water, where, left, they would probably have drowned. Hence he, too, came in for a solemnly accepted share in the interest, if not the fame, of the occasion. And Tacitus, for a day, was forced to content itself with David and 'Bijah as idols, for John Erskine did not appear. His proceedings on the morning after the occurrence puzzled his family and the village at large and to this day no explanation of it has been vouchsafed to them.

He came down to breakfast, showing in his face the marks of the physical ordeal through which he had passed. After an absent-minded meal, he rose suddenly and, without a word to any one, went out. The next thing Tacitus knew was that the doctor had escaped them. Though Martha declared no call had come for him, he had, at the hour for morning consultation at the office, motored swiftly out of their midst.

He hardly understood his own action. He was

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moved by an impulse, by an overpowering instinct. He hardly thought at all as the car sped away from Tacitus, covering the miles on the highroad to Attica. He only knew that he was impelled, driven on by a great hunger, a great desire. He held the car steadily on its way, thankful to feel the clean, sweet morning air sweeping past him. He recognised trees and farms and hills and bends in the road, all the familiar landmarks, with a fresh gladness. He even hailed the mean outskirts of the country town with a new interest, seeing every detail with a keen eye. From the purlieus of Attica, the treeless streets of little houses, he rolled through wider streets of pleasanter dwellings, on to the broad avenue lined with the pretentious mansions of Attica's elect. These all had "grounds" planted with clumps of trees, preferably cut-leaf maple, weeping willow and birch, copper beech, and other ornamental sorts, and boasted ornate iron vases and beds of early flowers. The houses all looked prosperous and comfortable and as if the people who lived in them were provided with every luxury — except imagination.

Down this street John rolled, past the brownstone American-Gothic Episcopal church, with its locked doors, past the square wooden Congregational church, with its high windows of ruby and amber glass, past the last residential building, where the dentist's sign held its place in the bow window; on to the centre where red-brick and wooden office

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buildings, banks and shops, bordered the busy pavements. Here trolleys clanged and motors met the farm wagons from the country.

He threaded his way across this bustling square, and again ran into a poorer quarter not long built, housing the operators of the mills which gave the little city some fame and more wealth. His journey was nearly ended. He here ran the motor up to the sidewalk, stopped the engine, and jumped out. Heads craned out of the windows of the tiny red-brick houses. Two or three children playing in the street ran up to stare at the car.

John, unconscious of the scrutiny, walked rapidly away, turned the corner by the iron lamp-post into the next street, and saw before him what he had come to find, a small brown church wedged between the poor dwellings, its small square belfry surmounted by a cross. The next moment, with a curious feeling of excitement, he opened the door and entered. He was aware of an instant feeling of relief, of peace. The church was open; it was empty, and it was a consecrated place. He walked a little way up the aisle, turned into a pew and knelt down. He did not understand or seek to explain. He said no words, he formulated no thought; but he worshipped, he received. He did not pray. Gradually, however, as he knelt on, his head buried in his hands, the incongruity of his presence here obtruded itself on his mind. How strange that, having passed here once months ago, the little church should have leaped

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to his memory, with an insistent invitation as soon as he had regained consciousness on the bank by the creek. He had opened his eyes to fatigue of body, but to no such weariness of life as had weighed him down through all the winter. He had been glad that he was alive, and vividly the small brown church had presented itself to him, filling him with an irresistible longing for the opportunity that it offered of peace and comfort.

This desire, as strength returned, he had combated as unreasonable, fanciful. But this morning, freed from the fussy ministrations and anxieties of his womenkind, he had followed what he had begun to realise was a spiritual demand, and — here he was. He had, in coming, acknowledged the demand, acknowledged a need in himself. Well, and now, what would come of it? Could the strength which he had received here, and of which he was sensible, work any change in his life, in his outlook? Could it keep forever at bay the stalking black depression of the past months, satisfy the hunger that filled him, make bearable the failure of his hopes? In the back of his brain, as he asked the question, he knew where the trouble lay. But now, when Tacitus waited to acclaim him over again as their friend and saviour, when every man recalled some kindness he had done, when they glowed with a return of the old affection — could he choose this moment to win peace for his soul by robbing them of their faith in him?

The old torturings were his again. He rose

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abruptly from his knees and saw, for the first time, that the figures on the altars were of coloured plaster; that the gilt vases were filled with paper flowers; that the whole effect of warmth and colour was won by means both cheap and tawdry. Yet it did not disgust him. The very inadequacy of this expression of adoration struck him as pitifully human. We would offer flowers of paradise, but our best are but poor, fly-blown imitations after all.

He turned and walked down the aisle, feeling self-conscious and half-ashamed. This was really an extraordinary thing that he had done. What would his father have said? He had a vivid presentment of the old doctor reading his "Tribunal" and growling against "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." At the door, he drew a leaflet from a box. He paused outside to read it. It was a printed sermon by an eminent churchman, proving conclusively and brilliantly what America would gain from the only possible religious unity in the embrace of the one Church. He tore up the paper and threw the bits into the street, hot with annoyance. He walked quickly back to the motor. It was God, not the Church, he sought. Yet with an instant interest he realised that to find God he had come to the church. It was a narrowing up that was in line with his later thoughts. He started the engine, buttoned his coat, and sprang in. The children stood and stared. Heads reappeared at the windows. He was glad to leave mean streets.

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Crossing the square this time, he was hailed by the old judge, his father's friend. John pulled up short.

"Well, John, how are you? What are you doing here? Have n't seen you for a long time."

John laughed. "I don't know what I am doing here. It's out of my beat."

The judge was a large, important figure: a man of influence. He nodded and vaguely waved the paper which he carried rolled in his hand like a baton. "That's right, my boy. Don't get in a groove. Keep broadening out."

John looked at him keenly with a smile.

"Well, sir," he said, "I am beginning to think that the great thing is to be narrow. Regards to your daughter. Drive over to see us — Cousin Roxina often speaks of you."

The car slid off and sped back through the prosperous street. But there was no such peace on the return journey as there had been on the way out. Swift reaction followed a false exaltation. An instinctive joy in life triumphant over death, the equally instinctive impulse to thanksgiving, combined with he knew not what subconscious impressions of the little brown church, — these had sent him gladly on his way.

Now, driving home along the familiar road he knew how fruitless had been the pilgrimage, how short his joy in living, how empty his thanks. "Just to see the truth — and go for it," as Jean had once

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said, that alone he knew is worship, that alone is thanks and praise.

He shivered back from the thought of what this demanded of his pride — Not yet — not yet. So he returned to Tacitus.

A letter from Rufus Haines as chairman of the committee of arrangements awaited him at the house. In it John read that his fellow citizens, desirous of showing their regard and affection and their recognition of his services during the past ten years, as well as to testify their admiration of his heroism, were organising a meeting to be held in the memorial library the next night, when they hoped to present him with a small testimonial etc., etc.

Rufus Haines had struck while the iron was hot and had shaken up the city fathers to good effect.

That night, as the judge sat reading his paper by his fire in the library of his house in that prosperous street in Attica, his daughter near, he paused once or twice.

“Narrow?” he said to himself, “narrow?” He repeated it because John Erskine was, in his opinion, no fool. But as the evening passed he decided that his hearing must have been at fault. Was not the motto of his competent sons and well-read daughters the same, — “Be broad”?

CHAPTER XXXIX

WHEN the evening train from Attica stopped at the small brown station of Tacitus that night, one passenger alighted, a girl whose air was so unlike that of the usual rural type that the new ticket-agent instinctively advanced along the wooden platform to meet her. She was tall and boyishly slim, wrapped in a long travelling-coat with a big dark fur collar, and, as she stepped into the light of the oil lamp affixed with a tin reflector to the station wall, her face was sweet and tender and gay. She was smiling, but her eyes were dim.

"Is the bus here?"

The man nodded, speechless.

"My trunks — I shan't need them to-night. Please send them down in the morning to Dr. Erskine's. Good-night."

She disappeared round the corner of the building before the man realised that he had lost the chance of carrying her bag.

Jean recognised with a thrill of absurd joy the unbeautiful shape of the old Tacitus bus, backed up as of yore with its door to the little platform. Swinging in her bag, she plunged head first into its black and empty depths.

"There's nobody else," she called to the driver.

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"Stop at Dr. Erskine's. The gate, please." There was a tremor of excitement in her voice.

The driver replied by an unintelligible sound, started his horses, and in a moment the bus with a squeak started towards the village.

Jean, with every sense sharpened, listened eagerly for the remembered sounds. How well she knew the muffled stroke of the horses' feet and the steady jingle of the bells. How she, as a child, had loved this drive in the dark, eyes shut, nestled against her mother, playing the game of guessing how far they were by the feeling. There — the horses had slackened their pace, slow, plod — plod — creak — creak — and tinkle — tinkle up the hill; and now the brow of the hill reached, the vehicle seemed to recover itself and balance for a moment before the downward slope that led into Tacitus. Yes, the whip snapped, and again the quick jingle of the bells and the rapid trot told her that she was nearing her journey's end. For an instant she wished that she had not come. She sat, frightened and small, in the corner of the bus as it slowed and stopped. She summoned her courage then, and jumped out, handed a coin to the man on the front seat, and, taking her bag, turned and entered the gate between the stone posts. There she stopped for a moment. It was a joy and yet a pain to find it all the same. If only it could show her that it had missed her a little!

The elms and locusts along the drive showed tall and leafless still in the light of the rising moon. Be-

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fore her the lofty Doric pillars loomed grey — all within the porch was in darkness, no lights in the windows; only a gleam shone through the fan-shaped leaded pane above the front door.

As she reached the foot of the steps, she paused. What had she done? How had she dared return? It was not really her own home — yet it was here that she had longed to be. She must go in. She mounted the steps lightly but resolutely, crossed the porch rapidly, turned the brass knob, opened the door, and stepped into the hall. Her heart was beating furiously.

She closed the door quietly and set down her bag. She saw thankfully that it was all unchanged. But, oh, suppose, now at the eleventh hour, something had happened? Suppose, since she had heard, that something had happened to him? Her hand at her side, to still her heart, she walked quickly to the door of the study and knocked softly. An interminable minute followed, crowded with all the fears of the world, before John Erskine's voice answered, "Come in."

For an instant she paused, then she opened the door, and stood looking into the room. He was seated with his back to her at his desk by the reading-lamp.

"Well?" he said, without turning. Then, something told him: the something that we yet have no name for. It came vibrating through the space that separated them, it struck heart and soul and

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sense, and John Erskine knew that Jean Dimmock was there — not three thousand miles away as reason said. Though certain, he dared not move. He sat like stone, his hand on his head.

“Jean,” he said, and his voice was weak, “if you are there — speak.”

“I am here,” her own voice was breathless.

He heard the door close softly. He understood. She had come home to tell him of this great engagement. Slowly, as if lifting a weight upon his shoulders, he rose to his feet, his hands clenched at his sides, and turned. She stood, with her back against the door. In her attitude was a curious mixture of humility and pride. She waited on his reception of her, he saw that. He saw the independent uptilt of the chin, the question in the level grey eyes; the little gay, tender smile upon her lips. She waited, and though he made no move, bound helplessly, his eyes spoke to her, and through an anguish which she did not understand, they welcomed her.

“Jean!” The words seemed dragged from him.

Laughing to keep back tears, breathless, she advanced. His hand met hers, held hers firmly, held her a pace from him, yet near enough for her to see what this time had done for him, the stern seal it had set upon his face, the grey it had strewn in his hair. She could only cry with a break in her voice, “Oh, J.E. — oh, J.E.”

But though the words quivered through every nerve, drawing the blood from his heart in a sicken-

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ing wave and sending it beating to wrists and temples, he held himself rigidly in hand.

"Grown," he said with a smile that seemed to twist his lips. "I hardly know you."

As he said the words he felt that she was hurt. She withdrew her hands.

"I must get out of these things," she said, turning away. "I am smothering! And Martha and Cousin Roxina — "

He followed her rapid, sure movements as she drew off her gloves and untied her veil, but despair struggling with passion in his heart kept him still. Now she was slipping out of the long, heavy coat, yet he did not move to help her. To have her here after the months, the years of sick longing, here, close to him, move lovely than she had ever been — the old Jean grown woman — To save himself dishonour he turned to the door.

"I will tell them you have come."

The coldness of his voice, the constraint of his manner chilled her. He had not even asked her why, nor how, she had come. She stopped him.

"No, let me go, please. May n't I? I want to give them a surprise." The colour had deepened in her cheeks. She passed him into the hall.

The door in his hand did not quite close. He stood still and waited to hear the cry of joy from old Martha, followed by happy, inarticulate bursts of voices and laughter from the kitchen. Then Martha and Jean came out together and passed close by, old Martha

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limping, Jean's light footfall hurrying ahead to the stairs. He heard their voices, Martha's first.

"You shall have some supper in a jiff, Miss Jean. There ain't much in the house, but I kin scratch up somethin'. My, but ain't you growed! What'll Miss Roxina say! An' you goin' to be married to a lord."

The answer came distinctly. "I'm not going to marry anybody, Martha. I always told you that I should die an old maid. And here's my clock — bless its heart. I'd like to hug it!"

He heard old Martha's shocked, pleased protest, then the swift rush of her feet up the stairs, a stifled burst of joy from above — and the door closed.

CHAPTER XL

"I DON'T know as I understand yet how 't is you are here," Miss Roxina declared, as she and John sat in the dining-room while Jean ate the supper which Martha had proudly prepared.

"Nothing has ever tasted as good as this in my life," Jean declared. She had no intention of explaining anything. "You see, I just had to come," she ran on. "You know, Cousin Roxina, you always said that I acted first and thought afterwards. Well, that's what I've done this time." She paused for a second. "You see, it was all rather a bore. Fun, of course. But such a crowd of people one did n't care two pins for — and I got wound up in it. I was afraid that if I did n't come suddenly I should never come at all. And I did n't want that. So here I am! I believe that ever since I went away I have been thinking of coming back, just like this. I used to think of you often when we were in Switzerland last Christmas. You remember I wrote to you about it. The bright sun and the sparkling air made me think of Tacitus. Oh, I thought of you much oftener than you know!"

But Miss Roxina was not to be put off. "But what in the end made you come back just now? And why did n't you write us? John would have met you in New York, would n't you, Cousin John?"

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"Oh, I thought you'd had enough of letters," Jean answered hastily.

John saw that the sparkle had died from her face. It looked strained and white.

"You're tired," he said. He could not keep all the tenderness out of his voice. She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"There!" Cousin Roxina cried suddenly, "I don't believe anybody's told Jean yet about you and 'Bijah —"

"Leave that, Cousin Roxina," John broke in quickly, "for to-night."

The old lady acquiesced, talking garrulously now of village affairs, of the new maid who had come to wait on her and help Martha, of the electric light in the square and at the bridge, of Maria Beebe's marriage, of Constance, trying to crowd all the news of the three years into an hour. Supper over, Jean went upstairs with her.

"You and Cousin John will have a lot to talk over," Cousin Roxina said. "I guess he's impatient to hear about all the places you've been and the people you've met. He knows so much and he never has any one to talk to. So, go down, my dear. It is strange to see you so tall, in a long dress! Now, good-night." The old lady put up her face, but Jean threw her arms round her.

"Please don't say that anything is strange. I've been so homesick. I want it all just as it used to be."

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She stood still for a moment, straight and tall and grave, and then went out of the room and down to the study. She felt that she must go quickly or she would not have the courage to go at all.

John heard her step and opened the door for her. In silence she crossed to the fire, followed by him.

"I am cold," she said.

"How is Nina?" he asked perfunctorily. "And Mackenzie?"

"Both dears and both well. Won't forgive you if you don't appear soon. Nice kiddies, too. Your namesake, little Jack, is a darling. May I smoke, J.E.?" She drew a cigarette from a tiny gold case. "Every one does there. You might as well learn the worst of me, you know."

He handed her a lighted match. "It's a question of convention," he said stiffly. "There is no principle involved."

"That's good of you!" she mocked, her head against the high settle-back. John was smoking his pipe, standing with his back half to her, gazing into the fire. "Awfully good of you. But you must n't be too sure, J.E. Manners are a pretty sure index to morals, I find."

"Don't," he said sharply.

"Why not?" Her voice was still mocking. "You have shown me quite plainly that you don't care what I do, J.E."

"Care!" The word burst from him. "Care! What do you know about caring?" His voice was bitter.

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"I do know," she said.

There was silence. Jean could hear her own heart beat. The cigarette was out. She was rigidly still, her eyes on the fire. "I do know," she repeated. She was shivering now. The words came brokenly. "I — do — know — oh, J.E., can't you see that I — that I'm not a child?"

The man by the fire raised his head from his arm where he had rested it and straightened himself slowly.

"This is horrible," he said slowly, "horrible." His voice was dead and toneless. He bowed his head again as if beaten. "I could not have foreseen this."

"Foreseen this? Foreseen what?" she cried sharply. "Oh, J.E., what is it? What is the matter? I feel there is something. I think I've always felt it. Something that I don't know. And now I'm sure of it. Oh, J.E., I can't bear it. Tell me." She sat forward, her hands strained together, gazing at him. But he did not move and the sight of his suffering shook her. Her voice became pleading.

"J. E., don't turn away from me. Whatever it is, you can tell me." Still silence and a doubt crept into the girl's mind. She rose slowly. Her voice trembled with a hurt surprise. "Unless, J.E., you don't want me, and I should n't have come back."

She got no further. With a groan, John Erskine turned his eyes to hers. The yearning, the passion in them overcame her, turned her faint.

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"Then, speak to me, J.E.," she cried, "if it is n't *that*, it's something else. J.E., you must."

"No, it is n't — *that*," he said, speaking with difficulty. He caught her wrists. "I don't want you away. I want you here — want you — I love you. Do you hear?" He was gazing down into her face which seemed to melt and swim before his eyes. Holding her gaze which answered his, seeing the quiver of nostril and lips, as she swayed towards him, he yet held her sternly from him. "No — no — you can come no nearer. You can never come nearer. Jean, listen and try to grasp it — "

He saw the face he loved blanch, but she did not move nor flinch. Then, slowly, each word falling into the strained silence, he ended. "I killed your father." He dropped her wrists and turned from her.

"Sit down," he said briefly.

She stood quite still for a moment, then turned mechanically and sat down upon the settle, trying to grasp the significance of his words, her eyes staring at the pattern of the old rug beneath her, blue — red — purple. It was still there. How funny that Cousin Roxina had wanted a new carpet, ages ago. How kind he had been to her that very day — that terrible day. And he had known. It was he, — oh, how was it he? Her mind, tortured by the pain of her heart, revolted, refused to harbour the idea. She had never been told any details — had never understood. She realised now that she had shrunk from

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knowing — had been afraid to know some horror. This he had comprehended. Her father — a rush of tenderness for the parent she had loved but little filled her. A remorse that she had not mourned him better — a remorse like that which had seized her in the old harbour, born of imagination, shook her. Tears filled her eyes. J. E. had found her in the harbour and had brought her here. She had always liked the old rug. She mechanically followed the Persian pattern, tracing the colours — blue — red — purple —

“Jean!”

She started, shading her face. He stepped to the end of the settle and turned out the nearest lamp, leaving her in shadow, then returned to the space before the fire. Finally he forced himself to speak. His voice was controlled and even.

“I tried to spare you this. It is a long story, but I think you must hear — When I found out three years ago that I loved you — ”

The girl leaned forward, suddenly alert.

“Yes, when I knew that I loved you and feared that the very force of my feeling might awaken some answering feeling in you — I sent you away. I intended that you should not come back.” He saw the wearied tension of her slight figure. His voice broke. “I must tell you — all. Try to bear it. Poor little Jean — poor little Jean!”

“Don’t mind me,” she begged. “Go on.”

“Had you married and never come back you

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would never have known." His voice was pleading. "You see."

She shook her head and her voice was broken with tears. "All that between you — and me — when you loved me. How could you — how could you, J.E.! — oh, go on."

There was silence for a second. Then he continued, his voice hard in his effort for control.

"Yes, it must be done. Go back to your mother's illness, please. She suffered from an obscure disease. I was younger then, fresh from abroad. I gave her the best of my skill, but she died. I was baffled. I went to your father, my friend, and begged him to permit a *post-mortem*. He refused. He loved her. Perhaps now I understand better. She was buried. But the fame of her case had reached far. The clinic in Attica was not as scrupulous then as they have made it since. The fear passed through my mind, and I believe through your father's, too, — that — " He paused, frowning. "Well, no matter. The night after your mother's funeral I was called about midnight to go to the Bullocks — at the sand dunes — beyond the cemetery. Knowing that I must twice pass the gate of the cemetery and so keep a watch, I was glad to go. It was moonlight when I drove out and I could see that all was undisturbed." For the first time, realising the full significance of his words, Jean recoiled.

"The woman was very ill — in great pain — and it was half-past one before I left their house. As

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it had been bright moonlight when I started, I had no lamp on the buggy. It was black night when I reached the gate of the cemetery on my way back. It was open. I drew up in the sand which muffled the sound of my horse and wagon, and looked in. I saw a figure. I jumped out quickly and crept in. At the gate of the enclosure a man set upon me. We grappled, fighting and swaying, until I wrenched my right arm free and struck him with my full force with the loaded end of my whip. The man went down like a log. I drew out matches, knelt by his side, struck one, and looked. It was your father."

He did not notice that the girl, who had followed every word, fell back at the end with a sigh of relief. He stopped for a moment, then went on. "My mistake, my weakness, was that I did not confess and give myself up at the time. It was one of those fatal moves that we cannot understand afterwards. But I persuaded myself that it was *best* for me to keep silence. I put aside the right. I knew that I had only acted in self-defence, that I had struck down a friend whom I loved, that I was not guilty, morally, of murder. It was my infernal pride. My family and name and my own reputation were dear to me. I knew — as I know still — that, however upright a man may be, however guiltless of sin, such a story will brand him for life. There is always a taint. I could not face that. My silence would involve no one else, it could hurt no one, so I reasoned. But, believe me," — he raised a shaking hand, — "every

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lapse from truth is punished — not hereafter, but in suffering here. Through my silence I have met the death of my own hopes, of all that could make life dear to me — in the loss of your love.” He turned, his head bowed. When he spoke again in a moment, it was in the voice of a man who can bear no more. “For God’s sake, Jean, go — leave me!”

Often in the past three years he had lived through this possible scene, had felt her scorn, her horror, her reproach; had heard her words and borne her silence; had seen her, in either case, pass from his sight forever. But now, as she did not move, a new fear seized him. He looked up. She was sitting forward, her hands clasped, her still face strong, her mouth tense, but her eyes full of pity — yes, and love.

He sprang to his feet. “Don’t,” he cried, “don’t, don’t. You can’t understand.”

“Oh, I do.” She was rising, coming towards him, but he stepped back, and she stopped, as she realised the possession of a fixed idea in his wild face.

“Oh, J.E.,” she commanded, “be sane. What right had you to think anything? Oh, I can see how you have suffered. But I have suffered, too. You have suffered all these years — but I have suffered hideously to-night. But now it is over. Nothing stands between us. Can’t you see? You have broken the silence. There is only the blow — but you have atoned for that blow again and again, J.E.! Put your life since then in the balance against it — your

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kindness to me, your devotion to the whole village. It far outweighs. Can't you see? Oh, do be sane," she implored.

She took a step nearer. "I have come back to you of my own free will. You sent me away. You did not ask me to come. And now I am here — and I understand it all, and I want to make up to you a little."

"A little," he groaned.

"For all that you have done for me, all that you gave up for others when you came back here to Tacitus, all that you have suffered since. Oh, J.E., I had to go abroad to realise it: to know what a temptation there must have been to you to stay there. But no, you came where you believed your duty lay, and now I have come back, too. Don't send me away again. I cannot bear it." Her voice broke.

He turned away and sank down in the chair at his desk.

"Jeanie," he said groaning, "I must, I must. Don't you see that I must? It never can be made right."

"Love can make all things right if you'll let it!" She fell on her knees at his side. With a cry he drew her into his arms. She raised her face to him, but he pushed her aside, and fell on his knees beside her. "We must pray," he said, "we must pray."

She felt the tension in the arm across her shoulder, and realised that her own suffering was as nothing compared with his.

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They knelt together in silence. Then his arm slipped from her shoulder. They rose together. His face had won no peace. She laid her hand on his. He looked at her with eyes that hardly saw her.

"Not yet," he said huskily, "not yet. But I shall find a way. Don't worry. I shall find a way." He led her to the door.

She lingered there a moment, her eyes full of fear.

"I hate leaving you. I am not afraid now of anything but separation. And there were things — I was afraid — " She clung to his hand. "You have not asked me anything about anything."

"To-morrow," he said.

CHAPTER XLI

THE white hall was palely lit by a tall, old-fashioned oil lamp upon a table, as Jean came out from the study. Near the foot of the stairs the old clock ticked loudly, and, as she passed it, she saw that its hands were just short of midnight, and she paused as she reached the door of her room above to hear the clock strike the hour. Its voice had a deep and solemn significance in the silence of the old house. She told herself that it knew of her great happiness, shadowed though it was — and shared in it; that it knew love to be a solemn thing as deep as the note it struck.

She opened the door and shut herself into her room. A fire burned in the fireplace, its flicker lighting the austerity of grey and white and blue.

She stood now in her room, the room of her girlhood, dazed, confused, by all that had been revealed. She was exhausted, shaken, yet uplifted. Sleep seemed impossible. The revelations of the night, John's love for her, and the truth of her father's death, singly enough to stir her to the depths of her nature, together almost stupefied her. Her feelings were strangely, inextricably mixed. There could be little of the joyous ecstasy of a young girl's dream of love in this experience. She had left John

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grave and troubled, the warp of his love for her darkened by the woof of remorse for her father's death and for his silence.

She walked across to the fire, her face pale, her grey eyes enormous. She shivered, though the room was warm. She was filled with a yearning passion of pity for the man whom she loved. What had he not suffered! He, the soul of truth, under the weight of that secret all these years! The secret accident of a sin that was no sin — Now he had told her all, she would help him to forget and to be happy. But, as she affirmed this to herself, something within her questioned it. Could there ever be forgetfulness for him? — and without it, happiness? Must there not always be a lurking, hidden remorse in such a character as his which would prevent the fulness of joy to both? “Oh, it's unfair — unfair,” she cried to herself in her pity. Yet the uncompromising streak of truth in her declared it to be fair. As he had said, a lapse from truth must bring its own punishment. No man may judge for himself when he stands before a fault committed, whether it be by accident or of intent, he must confess and bear the punishment meted by his fellows, or suffer his own condemnation. She tried to combat these thoughts with sophistries. Supposing he had confessed at once and given himself up? Her cousin would have taken her to that shoddy New York household with its religion of second-bests. J.E. saved her by his silence from that. Besides, she

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told herself that death to her father had been more merciful than life without her mother.

Yes, John had saved her from much, and in spite of him, she told herself, she would return her debt. She was too modern to question her own worth. She knew that she was lovely and talented and young, that she could hold the cup of life brimming to his lips. With a flush which swept her pale face she vowed that, in spite of himself, he should drink and find forgetfulness.

Yet as she said it, sitting forward in her dressing-gown gazing into the embers, something in her mocked. She would have him hers, then, drugged by passion, dulled in his conscience by her beauty and her charm? No — no — she would not that. Rather share the burden with him, if burden there must be, than help him to its shirking. Once again the youth in her cried out for a care-free joy, an unshadowed happiness, but she answered it sternly enough. She had fled from pleasure, weary; now she must welcome pain.

Pleasure! How she hated it! How she hated the weakness which had laid the fine pride of her maidenhood at the mercy of the chance comer. The memory was unbearable. She had fled that for sanctuary here, where, in memory, life seemed almost ascetic.

With a sudden shock she faced a question. Must she tell John Erskine? The answer was instant. All — nothing less than all. Would he understand?

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Oh, if she had only told him to-night — but he had asked her no questions, given her no opportunity. Was he asleep yet? No — not yet. Surely, not yet. His face returned to her. She saw its settled look of patient endurance — then the torment, the horror, and the fixed determination with which he had first met her pleading. Yet he had yielded to her. Was it in a moment of strength or weakness? How had she won? *Had* she won?

She sat upright, seized by a sudden foreboding. Suppose he were alone, thinking it over? Suppose the doubts returned. Suppose! Ah! — suppose anything! Suddenly the room, the house, seemed filled with dread. She was cold with frantic fear.

She sprang up, crossed the room in an instant, was out into the dark hall, down the stairs; the lamp was going out below, the intermittent blue flicker reflected palely on the wainscot. If the study door were locked! She turned the knob, it yielded, and she entered.

John Erskine, sitting at his table, raised his head from his arms. His eyes were bloodshot, his face grey and haggard. He blinked at the figure with the white, frightened face.

“Jean,” he said huskily, “go back upstairs.” He rose. “Go back upstairs,” he repeated firmly.

But she advanced. “What is it? What are you going to do?” Her eyes fell upon an envelope upon the table addressed to herself. “J.E. — J.E.” — her voice rang wildly. “You love me so little!”

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"So much," he answered doggedly, but his head was bowed.

"So little that it does not nerve you to face the consequences of your own — stupidity." She spoke brutally. She was shaking from head to foot, but she went on. "When you had given your word to me — "

"Don't," he cried brokenly, "don't."

"Give me the letter."

Their eyes met. He pushed it towards her and turned away, gazing down from under his hand at the meaningless marks on the blotter, while she read. How could she understand? She could not. She must despise him. He felt utterly beaten, defeated, prostrate.

"So you still feel that you must pay." Her voice was shaking. "You took me into your house — as a payment. You thought you would do your duty to me, and so pay. But you liked me, and then loved the duty — so that form of payment failed. Then you sent me away and thought you would pay in suffering. That did until to-night when I came back and you knew I loved you. Then you believed you would pay by losing my love through the truth. But I did not stop loving you. And now, all else having failed, you say here that it must be 'life for life,' that though I may forgive, it will always be there between us and kill all love; that you once — *dead* — I am young enough to forget and to be — *happy*." Her voice was cutting.

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He folded his arms, bracing himself to meet her arguments, looking at her as if from miles away.

"Does n't it occur to you," she continued, "that there is something rather selfish in this desire of yours? Besides, how do you know that I care so much to be — happy? This is no case of dishonour, J.E. To save your pride, you have simply set up a fetish of punishment and wish to sacrifice to it, not only yourself, but me — " Her eyes blazed.

"Don't," he cried sharply, "don't. I can bear no more. The strain of it, these years and years, — centuries, — I have gone over and over it, over and over. But I swear to you" — he looked up — "I never thought of your loving me. And to-night when you left, it seemed the only way out. I was wrong — I was wrong — I see that. But what else could I do?" His shoulders shook, and from under his hand slow tears, hardly wrung, rolled down. "Years and years, day in and day out, till I'm a broken man — to let you — young — innocent — a child — no!"

"Stop, oh, stop!" Her pained voice rang in appeal. She had found her argument at last. "Please don't. You don't know." She took a step nearer the bowed figure. "I ought to have told you. I meant to. I did, really."

"What?" John raised his head. "For God's sake, what?"

"Wait," she pleaded. "I can't tell you in a minute. But I will tell you all, John."

CHAPTER XLII

JEAN gripped her hands together and spoke where she stood behind him bravely, but in a low voice.

"Perhaps, J.E., I have frightened you too much. It's very hard to tell. I did not think that I could ever tell anybody." She paused, then plunged ahead. "It began the summer that I was seventeen. I had never known any boys or seen any men but you, till Rex Challoner came. He was amusing and good-looking, and made love to me in a way from the beginning, quite harmlessly, talking nonsense, and I liked it. The night that he asked me to go to the sand-dunes I knew in my heart that I ought not to go. But it was such a lark, and he was so wild to have me, that I did. He said it was no harm, and I was not sure that it was. Anyway, I went. And there he kissed me — he said he loved me. He said that I loved him because I let him kiss me; but I said that I did not. But I liked his kissing me, J.E. I did — I hate telling you this, but I must." She stopped.

"We walked back and I was miserable. I did not understand. I hated having liked his kissing me. Well, you let me in, and when I saw your face I was even more ashamed and frightened. I wanted frightfully, all of a sudden, to be wonderfully good for you. I went upstairs and vowed, J.E., that I would."

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She stopped with an intake of breath. There was no sound from John Erskine. She went on. "Well, you sent me away. Now I know that it was because you loved me and were punishing yourself. Then I thought it was because you wished to punish me, and it made me — reckless.

"Of course you had my letters, giving you all the facts of my life, J.E., but facts are not what really count. The Baroness was a splendid chaperone, because she knows every one and could take me about. But I don't think that it was a very good place for a girl alone, even well-chaperoned. Freedom was in the air, a kind of liberty — and you had sent me away. I had nothing to tie to. Don't be hurt, please." Her voice was low and very tender. "It was no one's fault. It was just me. Religion was only a form to us, was n't it, J.E.? I can remember when I was quite little wishing that I could feel like the Methodists at the camp-meeting who rave and sing and shout. Our religion was too polite. I kept up forms which meant nothing for a year; then I was ashamed to be illogical. I let them go. Sometimes I went into the Catholic churches and knelt down, but I did not know how to pray their way. I felt horribly at sea; but every one I met seemed just as much so. None of the girls I knew who were studying music and things seemed any surer than I — but perhaps they did not need something to hold on to so much. Anyway, life seemed to me one big temptation. Nice women are not sup-

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posed to feel these things. I mean, it's expected of a boy, is n't it? I began to believe what Rex had said, and I imagined myself in love with one man after another. That was the worst of it, there were so many. Some of them I could laugh at. But others I could n't, and those, because I am a lady, I suppose, I dressed up in illusions and pretended to myself to love."

She stopped. Still there was no sound from the man at the table. There was silence for a time, then she went on, in a firmer voice.

"Of course, my music was an awful disappointment. When I found that I would never be more than fairly good, I felt desperate. I stopped working, and then Nina came along and took a fancy to me. She liked me a little for you and a lot for my looks, and because I did n't care a damn, and she took me to England with her. I don't suppose I was a failure. She introduced me to heaps of people; she started me on a round of country-houses. Nina's friends are go-ahead, and I was go-ahead, too." Again she stopped. "I don't want to make myself out any worse than I was. A good deal of the last year I have been miserable underneath — having a ripping time on top. I kept up a semblance of a fight, too, to pacify my conscience — or my mind, which told me plainly that I could not be in love with all the men whom I did not hate. I did fairly well — perhaps because not one of them attracted me enough. Then I met a man —" John Erskine

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moved. Jean looked down at him. "Don't be frightened, J.E. The worst of it is over. It was the man Nina wrote about to you. I met him first in town, and I was so afraid of him that I was rude to him. But he got invited to the house where I was staying. Well, Nina said I was to take him. He was rich, and all that, but more than that, he is handsome—beautifully handsome, big and slim and blond, and he went to my head like wine. But, oh, J.E., I felt that it was just the old thing over again. I did not like him, yet when he came near me I was fascinated. It was just now. I was in a dreadful muddle. I did not want to marry him when I was my best self, but at other times I did.

"Well, there was a woman staying there, a Miss Warwick. She goes about a lot. Every one seems to know her and like her. She is a good sort. You'd like her. She is about forty-five, has gorgeous red hair, green eyes, a big mouth, an ugly clever face. She is rather big and awkward, but a good shot, a thorough sportsman. Every one was expecting the announcement of my engagement. Nina was very keen. But I noticed that Miss Warwick rather stuck about with me, and then she asked if she might come up to my room one night. So she came. I don't know how she led up to it, but she suddenly went for me. She told me that she was going to talk straight; that she liked me and could not bear to see me make a fool of myself; that I must not marry him. She said that if I did I would hate myself more

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and more until I could not bear it, then perhaps take to drugs or drink and so sink lower and lower — all because the best of me was cheated.

“Before I knew it, I was telling her the truth, how I had fought and fought: how I could n’t fight him. She talked splendidly: made me see that a woman need not be ashamed of passion as long as she recognises what it is, and does not wrap it up in sentiment and work it off in sentimentality. She made me laugh, too. She said that was all an Early-Victorian cheat, like veneered rosewood furniture. She said that passion was a gift: that nothing good was made without it, music, nor pictures, nor books, nor beautiful children. But that the woman endowed with it must learn to call it by name and face it, as the best men face it; must learn to guard the flame, not letting it blow here and blow there: that it is a sacred fire. Well, when she left me that night, I meant to break it off with him at once. But — I did n’t. Nina had arranged a party to go to Paris, and we left the next day. We were together all the time. I hated it, but I could not break it off. Yet I would n’t be engaged, though Nina wrote you that I was.

“Then one day we got lost on purpose. We knew Nina would not really mind. We took a motor out to the Bois and we walked there; then we had luncheon; and then I wanted to see Notre Dame, so we motored there. He was bored. I always love it. When we had seen it, we crossed the bridge and

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walked along the quays. I love the old book-stalls there. He was quite mad, and was trying to get me to dine with him and drive in the Bois in the evening, and end up at the Ritz engaged. Then Nina would not scold. I was wild to do it. We had been together all day and I wanted to be weak. I had almost given in, J.E., in spite of Miss Warwick, when something happened. Looking through a lot of books, — on one of the stalls, you know, — I came on a small one bound in green, that looked familiar. I grabbed it. It was yours — the one I had helped you with. Your name stared at me from the title-page. I paid fifty centimes for it. He thought me insane. Then I just sent him away — and then I walked back over the bridge with your book and into Notre Dame, and there I sat down and thought things out. I realised for the first time all this that I have told you to-night. I realised the truth of what Miss Warwick had said; but more than that, I realised that there would have been no danger, no fear anywhere if I had only had something to believe in. I remembered the good days here, the work, the sense of cleanness and endeavour. I thought of you working. I remembered many things: how you had been my refuge always. I remembered your face the night you let me in. I remembered lots of other things. I asked myself why you had sent me away; why you had never come to see me.

“Suddenly I knew that I must come back: that I must come back and ask you to help me to some

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faith in something higher, perhaps through my faith in you."

She stopped. John lifted his head, but she put out a detaining hand.

"Not yet; let me finish. I don't think I realised, J.E., that I loved you. I only felt my faith in you. Yet, perhaps, I knew that you loved me. It's hard to be quite sure. Anyway, I got up and walked out of that church, determined to come home. I was afraid to go back to the Ritz. I went to a dull governess whom I had stayed with once, and wired Nina to come to me there. I had a bad half-hour with her the next day. She thought me most ungrateful; but I was determined, so she finally gave in. I stayed on with Mademoiselle, and sailed from Havre. There is the story, J.E. Wait a minute." She walked round to his side and stood before him. "J.E., you must not condone. You must not say that this is all very innocent." Her face was burning. "It's not. If I marry the wrong man, it won't be. It will be hell for him and for me, I *know* — J.E., if you are only not afraid — not afraid to risk it with me, don't you see — we could help each other — and oh! who cares after all," her voice broke — "about happiness?"

He rose blindly to his feet. "I do," he said, "about yours. Jean, you marvellous woman. Condone? I hate it" — he caught her hands — "hate every man who has touched your hand, looked into your eyes, quickened your pulse by one beat. I hate all

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the 'days' and the hours that have parted us. And your loneliness—that I have never guessed—listen and look up and smile — we need each other. From to-morrow, Jean, nothing shall stand between us. Condone? Never, my darling, but I understand. Go to bed. Quick!”

CHAPTER XLIII

THE Erskine Memorial Library was filling with a crowd that promised to outflow into the street. At the end of the big room, opposite the entrance, under the portrait of the old doctor, the chairman's table had been placed, and ranged behind it were the committee in whose name the meeting had been called. Owen Owens, Mr. Donner, Mr. Bowles, the Methodist minister, Mr. Savage, and two farmers, men of gravity and weight. A certain excitement was in the air. Every one knew of Jean's return and felt that it added the finishing touch to the occasion. Every one was eager to see her. Acquaintances all, the people smiled at each other as they took their seats. They liked the idea of the meeting in this room in which they felt a civic pride. Attica had not a better library. With its book-filled shelves, spaced by cases of minerals and of curiosities from far countries, its casts, its engravings, it made a fine background for the rows of village faces. All heads turned to greet David who arrived with Lillian and Mrs. Vincent. Milly, dimpling with pride, sat next to her friends. Constance Savage was in the front row. Seats were reserved by her side for Jean and Miss Roxina. Martha had already arrived with one of her cronies. Halfway down the aisle, Maria Beebe, Laura Meeks, and Joe Tanner sat

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whispering together. The meeting was called for 7.30. At 7.25, every seat in the room was filled, except two in the front row. At half-past seven precisely, the crowd of boys about the door parted and John Erskine passed through them and up the room. The building resounded to an enthusiastic burst of applause.

As he reached the table, he turned to bow his thanks. They saw that he was very pale.

"He has n't recovered from the shock yet," the whisper ran from row to row.

Now he was shaking hands with the committee and he was saying something about the empty chairs.

"I don't b'lieve Jean Dimmock's comin'. Ain't that odd?" Miss Meeks whispered. "No, she ain't. Nor Miss Roxina neither. See, they've showed those Attica folks — the judge's daughters — up into the seats. My! there is a crowd. Don't Dr. Erskine look awful white and kinder set!"

"Ladies and gentlemen — " Rufus Haines was on his feet speaking with an unusual earnestness — "fellow citizens of Tacitus. It is my grateful duty to state to you to-night, in a few words, the purpose which has called us here. In this day of commercialism, when every man's motives are suspected of self-interest, it is a grand thing to acclaim any man as an exception. How much more, then, when that man is as beloved as is Dr. John Erskine" — applause — "he needs no introduction to you" —

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laughter and applause — “yet I may be pardoned if I briefly recall one or two of his claims upon your regard. In the first place, he renounced a career abroad to return among you. Now, I know that you people of Tacitus have good opinions of yourselves, and with reason,” — cries of “Hear! Hear!” and cat-calls, — “but I don’t suppose you are going to tell me that you think Tacitus can compare as a centre with Paris, let us say — ”

“Paris, New York?” a man called at the door.

“Paris, France, my friends” — laughter. “Paris with all its store of historic associations and Paris — er — the home of the great Napoleon — Paris, the beautiful city of pleasure. This he renounced for Tacitus. Once here, what did he do? Did he repine? Did he regret? No; he threw himself heart and soul into your life. He built you this library in which we stand to-night” — applause — “he gave you a ground for recreation — where, by the way, I should like to say there’s to be a baseball game to-morrow and the team is in need of funds. He has placed his skill, his strength, at your service year after year, and to crown all, this very week, at the risk of his life, he performs a deed of heroism which must make the heart of every brave man here to-night — yes, and of every weak woman — beat faster” — prolonged applause. “It is not my duty to say more. I leave that to the task of the older and more worthy than yours truly. But before I sit down I would like to give three cheers for Dr.

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Erskine!" Amid a storm of applause and cat-calls from the boys about the door, he took his seat.

At that moment, two men rose together, one was the Welsh preacher, the other was John Erskine. Owen Owens, it was understood, was the next to speak. He came forward, clearing his throat, his hands under the tails of his best broadcloth coat, a humorous, kindly smile on his clever old face. But John Erskine stood where he had risen, his hands grasping the table-edge, his face white and determined.

"Excuse me, Mr. Owens," his voice was hurried but firm.

The preacher turned, startled. "Yes!"

John took a step forward. "Let me speak first."

The preacher gazed open-mouthed at the set face of the speaker.

"Certainly, John." He sat down with decision. It was an odd way for the boy to behave. The programme of the speeches was arranged.

John turned towards the room. A note of the unusual had crept into the proceedings. It aroused a surprised, expectant breathlessness in the people.

Maria Beebe shrugged. "Trust him," she whispered, "for gettin' into the lime-light."

"Ssh" — Laura Meeks was transfixed with excitement.

"I have asked Mr. Owens to let me speak first," John began, in a halting voice none of them recognised, "because I cannot let things go any farther

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until I tell you what may change your feeling in regard to me." He stopped and threw back his shoulders. "I am standing under my father's portrait. You all knew him — knew how he loved the truth and hated a lie. I believe that truth is as much to me as it was to him — yet for eight years I have lived a lie." He stopped. The room was wrapped in a shocked, incredulous silence. Those near him saw that the sweat stood on his forehead. He moistened his lips. "It was I who killed Robert Dimmock." He stopped again, hardly knowing what outburst he expected.

But the blank faces stared back at him in silence, which seemed interminable before Owen Owens, leaning forward, spoke —

"Tell us how it was, John," he said.

The simple words, free from all blame or hint of melodrama, had the effect of letting down his hearers. The room seemed to draw its breath. John turned to the old man.

"It was in self-defence. It was in the dark. I did not know whom I had struck down."

Again there was silence. Then John lifted his head, his face drawn. He addressed the room. "I had not been here long then. I valued my position among you. I dreaded the notoriety — the talk. I was tempted to keep silence — I fell — that's all there is to tell. You will know how to deal with me. No punishment can equal the hell I have suffered during these years. After the meeting I shall place

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myself in the hands of this committee and to these gentlemen I will answer any questions and make my formal statement." He stopped, his face and lips trembling. "I think some of you know how hard it has been for me to say this — to run the risk of losing your esteem." He stepped aside blindly.

Rufus Haines sprang to his feet, but before he could say the words that rose to his lips the preacher had struggled up and was speaking.

"As an old resident of Tacitus, I rise to express my confidence — " he began, but he got no further, for down at the door there was a movement in the crowd. The speaker paused, looking down the room. "What is it?" he asked. Some one elbowed through.

"Is Dr. Erskine here? The doctor's needed."

CHAPTER XLIV

IN silence, between the rows of faces known to him for a lifetime, John Erskine walked with bent head down the room, brushed through the group of boys at the door who parted to right and left. He passed out. He saw the motor waiting.

"Who wants me?" he said. "Oh, Jean — "

She stepped from the shadow. "J.E.!" her voice was tearful, yet thrilling exultantly, "I saw — I heard — I knew that you would — oh, I'm so proud, I'm so glad. It's out at the sand-dunes you're wanted. I drove round the motor. I'm going with you. You can never say no any more."

Her arm was in his. They walked down the path together. He saw her face, white and exquisite in the starlight. He wrapped her in coat and rugs, and took his place beside her.

As they glided off, Jean looked back. The lights in the library still shone. She looked until they were out of sight. The motor rounded the hill, dived down the other side, passed the station, crossed the track. Before them the curiously scriptural country lay distinct under the pale sky, cut by the ribbon of the road.

John Erskine spoke, in a hushed, exultant voice.

"Do you see, the road lies straight before us." He turned to her.

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With a wild leap of the heart, Jean saw his face, freed from the shadow of unrest, of brooding remorse, strong in the strength of a new peace. He was like a man who has walked from shadow into sunshine.

She knew that he was no longer afraid to love her; that he would withhold nothing and that he had all to give.

Stilled by her happiness, she sat muffled in her furs, thrilling to the touch of his arm, speeding on through the clear night air. All her being answered to the radiance of the pale, star-filled sky, to the magic light which lay over field and hill. Her spirit burned to the white heat of the Northman's aspiring passion. Heart and soul and sense seemed fused in one pure flame. To go on for ever like this, for ever, and to end in yonder white fire which burns in the Northern sky.

The car stopped. Jean roused herself from her trance, and saw with a curious superstitious shock that they were at the edge of the little wood which bordered the sand-dunes. The birches gleamed white and spectral against the little pines, and the track led through to a greater space of light, which Jean knew to be the sands.

"Well," John said, "I must leave you here in the car. If you get cold or tired, come to meet me. You know the cottage at the other side. I shall be as quick as I can." He got out and started down the track through the trees.

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Jean sat forward, watching him. Her pride in his strength and his goodness, vindicated to-night, swelled in her heart, beating triumphantly through all her conscious being. Mingled with it was a deep, tender pity for what he yet had to face. She realised all to which his action of to-night would lead; all that would be torment to his sensitive pride. But she was not afraid for him. As soon as the investigation should be over, they would go away. Away — away, alone together to wander in wonderful countries, yet always with their place, their own place, waiting for them here. She smiled. She had watched him out of sight.

She sank back. He had not asked her if she were afraid to stay alone. He knew that she was never afraid. Indeed, she welcomed this hour. She felt that, in both herself and John Erskine, passion was suspended for a space. They were in a calm which could not last, and she dreaded yet longed for the moment when he should finally allow the repressed feeling of years to burst its bounds.

She drew a deep breath, looking about her. How strange that this should be the very way she had come with Rex. This was the place that had first revealed the possibilities of self to her. Down that track, in the warm summer air, she had walked to seek the unknown, something that as a child she felt, in certain places, lay so near. She had walked into the wood with the searching eyes of the idealist, and had found herself fast in Rex's arms. With

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amazement she realised that she had lost the feeling of the nearness and actuality of the unseen since that night. The years between had been a maze of swift sensations, mingled, of pride and pleasure and pain. She had lost, as she dreaded doing, her power of awareness — and she had never known the loss.

She sat erect, keen, trying to grasp again the old sensation. What had she felt was there? Something just out of sight, just beyond touch and hearing, just beyond call, which the spirit on tiptoe might yet, by upward straining, glimpse. Stealing through her she felt the old strange choking gladness, not like the gladness of love, but a feeling more ethereal, less intoxicating, more like an emanation from the keen, white, flaming fire in the North, through the pines. She stood up, the rugs slipping down about her, her eyes wide and shining, unseeing. She stepped out of the motor on to the wiry grass. Her colour had risen, her heart was beating. She started down the track. On either side she gazed into the heart of the little wood, where the delicate stems of the white birches stood stilly among the pines. The silence was more intense than on that other night. The mystic meaning seemed, in the hush, about to be revealed. Oh, for some sign — some sign —

But the wood was passed, the sand-dunes lay before her. It was difficult going. She was tired. John had been such a long time. Her feet sank deep. She plodded ahead, determined to go to the

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cottage and meet John Erskine. A bitter disappointment filled her and depressed her. To-night of all nights she might have seen! She stopped to take breath. She was walking in John's footsteps. A faint rising wind just breathed over the crest of the hill, sifting the sand about her. There was not a light to be seen in house or barn of all the wide country spread before her.

"Just one great inscrutable sheet of trees and rocks and earth and sky and sand," she said fiercely. "With the meaning all left out. I hate it." She pushed on again. She remembered now her visit here with Constance. She longed to be back in the car driving homeward with John. Rounding the jutting sandbank she saw the track leading on to the cottage. A light burned in a window. Shadows moved against the muslin blind. She had a moment's resentment that to-night of all nights John Erskine should have to spend himself for these people. Then the scene of this evening rose before her, and with swift shame she realised that all they could together give to these their people would not be too much — but scarce enough. She followed the track in the sand across the gully. As she reached the other side, John Erskine came out of the door and down the steps to the road, turned and saw her waiting for him.

"Good," he cried; "just in time. How tall you look against that wall of sand!" He had reached her side and caught her hand. "And the road leads

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straight before us," he said again in a deep, happy voice. "Oh, Jean, my woman — my Jean!"

She looked up at him with a quick intake of breath. It was coming, that moment which she had feared — had longed for. She saw it in his face, in his eyes. He was drawing her to him — Far away — above and away — she heard confusedly a sound, but she was close in his arms.

The sound grew to a grinding, rushing roar. John's arms tightened about her. The hillside seemed sliding down upon them, a tall pine tree riding upon a great wave of sand, whose spray already struck them. She felt John bend above her, his shoulders to the hill, trying to shield her, and with an ecstasy that mastered all other sense she felt his lips in that supreme moment on hers. In the rush and roar, in the midst of the flying sand, he gave himself to her in that kiss.

The landslip roared by them, thundered down into the gully, and in the silence that followed, they drew apart and looked about them.

John raised his head and pointed. Above them, an outjut of rock had divided the onrush of destruction, to the right, to the left. They stood in an island of road, safe, untouched.

"But the rock," Jean cried weakly; "the rock. It was n't there before."

"The rock," John said quietly, "was under the sand. The shifting uncovered it. That is all."

She gazed across at him with widening eyes.

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"Oh!" she cried with a gasp, "how stupid I am! How stupid we all are!"

His answer was his hand upon her shoulder. "Come!" he said, turning her gently to face the piled stream of rock and earth across their road. "We must climb."

She laid her hand in his, and so, together, they made their difficult way over the heaped ruin to the sand dunes, down the track through the moon-lit wood to the quiet widespread country that lay beyond.

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